

BOOK REVIEW

Why Religion Went Obsolete: The Demise of Traditional Faith in America

by Christian Smith

Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2025, 426 pages

Christian Smith is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame. Having won multiple awards and accolades, he is well known and highly regarded as one of the leading contemporary Christian sociologists, specializing in the philosophy of critical realism, the social theory of personalism, and the sociology of religion. Overlapping themes that have emerged in his work include: evangelicalism—*American Evangelicalism* (1998), *Divided by Faith* (2000), *Christian America?* (2000), and *The Bible Made Impossible* (2011); the spiritual lives of adolescents and emerging adults—*Soul Searching* (2005), *Souls in Transition* (2009), *Lost in Transition* (2011), and *Young Catholic America* (2014); enculturated personalism—*Moral, Believing Animals* (2003), *What is a Person?* (2010), and *To Flourish or Destruct* (2015); and religion more generally—*The Secular Revolution* (2003), *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (2014), *Religion* (2017), and *Atheist Overreach* (2018). Not to mention all his other books, chapters, and articles, and administration of over \$20 million dollars of research grants. Part of his personal faith journey is described in *How to Go from Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in 95 Difficult Steps* (2011).

Why Religion Went Obsolete is first and foremost “a work of historical cultural sociology” (p. 17) in which Smith takes “a general *cognitive* and *practice* view of culture, conceiving it as a stock of *learned human knowledge*—both knowledge *about* things and knowledge of *how to do things*” (p. 8, emphasis in original). More specifically, or perhaps abstractly, he focuses on the cultural zeitgeist or deep culture that rendered religion obsolete. And by obsolete he does not mean useless or failed, nor even fully abandoned or extinct, but rather “when most people feel [something] is no longer useful or needed because something else has superseded it in function, efficiency, value, or interest” (p. 4). His thesis is that religion went obsolete in America between 1991 and 2009 during what he terms the “Millennial zeitgeist,” indicative of his constant careful distinction between Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Gen Zers.

His empirical evidence impressively doubles mere triangulation, combining six different types of datasets generated from the project’s beginning in 2021. His team first “conducted 209 personal interviews with a diverse sample of 18-to-54-year-olds living (across) the United

States" (p. 14) in 2022. They then conducted four focus groups in which they asked participants to "express and then explain their emotional reactions to a series of 50 visual images of American religious and non-religious people, social settings, and objects" (p. 15). Smith himself "conducted multiple systematic searches of hundreds of keywords by individual years" (p. 15) in both academic and popular media. He then conducted a second nationally representative survey of a sample of 2,009 US adults ages 18 to 77 in 2023 which he references as the Millennial Zeitgeist Survey throughout the book. He also draws on secondary analyses of multiple existing survey datasets, including the General Social Survey, the Pew Research Center, and the Gallup Organization. And finally, he includes conversations he held with mostly clergy and denominational leaders. Nevertheless, Smith remains admirably cautious in all his conclusions throughout the book, acknowledging that "all of sociology is interpretive" (p. 19), partial, and incomplete.

Part I: Setting the Stage, begins with a chapter on What Needs Explaining, that is, the by now well documented and known steady statistical decline of religion in America since the early 1970s despite the temporary pause of decline during the Reagan Revolution and the rise of the Religious Right of the 1980s. Included are all the most recent statistics on religious affiliation and service attendance, the rise of the "nones" and the "spiritual but not religious," the loss of confidence in religious institutions and clergy honesty and ethical standards, and the consequent church closings. As throughout the book, distinctions are drawn between the respective generations to demonstrate the historical trajectory. And as also throughout the book, insightful qualitative commentary from the interviews, focus groups, and conversations with leaders from multiple sectors of the religious landscape complements the quantitative data. Yet overall, Smith "detects a general groping in the dark for a clearer understanding of the bigger, inhospitable environment and what to do about it" (p.40). "For younger generations especially, traditional religion has gone the way of the electric typewriter" (p. 41).

However, Chapter 2 identifies how and why religion remains recognized as valuable regardless of its veracity. Most Americans believe that religion is good a) when it helps people be morally good, though it is not the only source of morality, plenty of non-religious people are morally good, and not all religious people are morally good; b) "when it helps people cope with life, sustain a positive outlook, and feel calm, happy, affirmed, and encouraged" (p. 48); c) "when it fosters community, social cooperation, peace, and harmony" (p. 50), but not when it is smothering, coercive, or even violent; d) "when it provides societal role models for basic moral integrity, decency, and honesty, especially by religious leaders" (p.52), though conflicted by the culture war over how to define what is good and true; e) "when it is moderate, not too weird, and certainly not fanatical or extremist" (p. 54); and finally f) when it strengthens the identity and solidarity of America as a nation as argued by the Christian Right. Generally, though Smith

does not say so explicitly, most Americans still believe that religion can have positive social functions regardless of its truth claims.

Following Chapter 3: Some Complex Ways Culture Changes, which includes some analogous models of change in fields of study other than sociology, Part II: Perfect Storms Converging comprises the main body of Smith's masterpiece. Chapter 4: Long-Term Social Trends identifies eight shifts in broader American culture and institutions beyond religion that were prior contributors to its obsolescence. Higher education for the masses, women entering the paid workforce, the deinstitutionalization of marriage and family, declining participation in face-to-face membership organizations, triumphant mass consumerism, intensifying expressive individualism, and the rise of emerging adulthood were all enabling conditions, if not causes. Smith's explication of all are detailed instructive summaries in their own right apart from their effect on religion. To highlight one, the shift from materialist to postmaterialist culture as first articulated by Ronald Inglehart meant that,

in social contexts of material scarcity and physical vulnerability, people prioritize the "materialist" values of material and physical security. As those societies become more economically prosperous and politically stable, people begin to take the attendant material and physical security for granted. They then prioritize "postmaterialist" (post-scarcity) values of individual autonomy and self-expression.

Chapter 5 turns the focus onto long-term trends specifically within the religious environment, identifying another seven shifts. The paradoxical cultural triumph but organizational decline of liberal mainline Protestantism as first articulated by Jay Demerath, the weakening of Catholicism as it wrestled with modernity after Vatican Council II, the backlash to the rise of televangelism and the Religious Right, the spread of Eastern religions and the New Age Movement, the warfare narrative of science versus religion, and the decline of confidence in organized religion all facilitated religious obsolescence. A highlight among these factors is the moralizing of religion and the concomitant downplaying of transcendence. Liberal mainline Protestantism has long been criticized by conservative fundamentalists and evangelicals for holding an immanent frame instead of a transcendent frame, and thereby reducing the Christian gospel to ethics. Consequently, most Americans "came to view religion as essentially about making people morally good. Religion, in this view, is not primarily about divine worship, timeless truths, sacred historical traditions, eternal salvation, theological doctrines, or the like" (p. 107). That precisely was the cultural triumph of progressives in turning "the focus of religion from eternity to life here and now" (p. 110).

Chapter 6: The 1990s: Beginning of the End elucidates the tipping point for traditional religion by identifying another eight non-religious, societal sources of its obsolescence: the end of the Cold War, the digital revolution, ascendant neoliberal capitalism, pop postmodernism,

multicultural education, millennials migrating to cities, the rise of intensive parenting, and “not-religious” becoming an acceptable identity option. It is difficult to say which one stands out, but suffice it to say here that the first three were certainly impactful. In 1991 alone, the end of the Cold War meant that “the United States no longer faced a godless ‘evil empire’ against which to define itself,” which until then had “ensured religion a place of privilege in the collective American sense of self” (p.128). That same year, the launch of the World Wide Web (WWW) launched ten different assaults on religion, including a) offering “alternative, flexible ways to find ‘community’ that required fewer commitments” (p. 140) and organized itself as a re-enchanted network, b) offering “a private realm in which to express, explore, and discuss religious questions and doubts” (p. 143) and the dark side of religion, and c) offering an incoherent ocean of news and opinions that had “the effect of corroding trust in external authorities and relocating the seat of authority within each individual’s self” (p. 146). Throughout the 1990s, neoliberal capitalism required that Gen Xers and Millennials invest “much more time, attention, energy, and emotions into preparing for careers” (p. 132) which simply “crowded out” religion. Moreover,

In a thousand and one ways, neoliberal capitalism socializes people to value autonomous individualism, continual innovation, material prosperity, market exchange relations, consumer satisfaction, endless competition, globalized cosmopolitanism, and the monetizing and marketizing of almost all aspects of life. (p. 136)

Chapter 7: The 2000s: Obsolescence Assured identifies eleven dynamics that, in retrospect, made religion’s demise “overdetermined.” September 11, 2001, and the reactive “war on terror” terminally associated religion with violence. The New Atheism led by a group of aggressively anti-religious intellectuals—the “Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse”—energized and emboldened the already non-religious and partially swung the burden of proof onto religion to substantiate its claims and merits. The third sexual revolution, after the previous in the 1920s and 1960s, promoted the “diversification, democratization, and ‘de-shaming’ of previously objectionable sexual behaviors and identities” (p. 184), supported by third wave feminism. LGBTQ+ was mainstreamed. Increasing religious pluralism cast into question any one particular religion, promoted epistemological relativism, and disqualified religion as a potential contributing basis for national identity. Religion was sidelined by identity partisan politics, as American identity

became increasingly invested with quasi-religious importance. Politics became sacralized on both the right and the left. For increasing numbers of Americans, political party faction became one’s tribe, ideology became dogma, political personalities like prophets, campaign rallies resembled revival services—all seeking the “salvation” of America from whoever was the diabolical adversary. (p. 208)

Meanwhile, there were multiple “crucibles of despair” during the 2000s that induced anxiety, fear, dread, anger, grief, and depression, including the “environmental nihilism” wrought by climate change, all of which contradicted traditional religion’s sunny orientation. The 2008 Great Recession hastened the disappearance of the American Dream, and the more “Millennials realized they would be the first American generation to fare worse economically than their parents” (p. 216), the more they focused on living in the moment. With the spate of books published arguing that people can be “good without God,” religion was stripped of its position as an important, or even necessary moral educator, and was left with that much less to offer. And of course, the surge of the “spiritual but not religious” and the religious “nones” “was not quite the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, but it helped secure religion’s relegation to obsolescence” (p. 226).

Chapter 8: Religious Self-Destructions documents eight self-inflicted wounds wreaked between and beyond 1990-2010, more than half of which were evangelical. Smith devotes five pages to charting the most prominent sexual and financial scandals, their cover-ups and their whitewashings, and a total of twenty pages to describing and naming more, enough to suggest the problem is systemic. The overarching mission of evangelicalism was publicly perceived to have drifted from proclaiming the salvific gospel of Jesus to the unkind Christian Right gaining political power, thereby generating “a defensive backlash from a broad array of Americans who otherwise had been willing to coexist and possibly even converse with conservative religion” (p. 250). Evangelicalism also promoted a hyper-individualistic, subjectively authoritative “me-and-Jesus personal relationship with God” that undermined the need for, and even relevance of, Christian community, much less institutionalized doctrinal religion. Ironically, evangelicalism also tried at the same time to construct an indubitable epistemological foundation based on modern rational apologetics and infallible biblical inerrancy that in the postmodern world was “culturally incomprehensible” (p. 261). More practically, evangelical purity campaigns came and went, triggering further backlash from even those who had bought in but later paid the price of emotional, relational, and sexual damage.

Internal to religion more generally, caustic denominational culture wars mirrored larger cultural battles on myriad issues in ways that insinuated nothing but money and power were at stake, sometimes leading to formal denominational divorces. Ultimately, religion came to be viewed as just another, but perhaps the most effective tool of social control, and most egregiously, the most manipulative and abusive kind. And generationally, it appeared to Millennials as simple toxic power-hoarding by Baby Boomers driven by their underlying identity insecurity. As Smith concludes, almost all these forces internal to religion were unplanned and unintended for their devastating effect.

In total, Smith addresses 42 different sources of religion’s obsolescence in Part II, and if this review reads like just an elaborated list, it faithfully reflects both Smith’s proclivity as a

writer—he persistently produces lists of factors and strings of descriptors—and the multi-dimensional breadth and complexity of the massive cultural shift he explicates.

Part III: The Aftermath begins with Chapter 9: Contours of the Millennial Zeitgeist (1990-2010). It opens with a section on the cultural tenor of successive decades: the 1950s were a time of anxious normalcy; the 1960s, troubled optimism; the 1970s, shaken anxiety; the 1980s, hopeful rebirth; the 1990s, boundary-breaking exhilaration; and the 2000s, depressing gloom. Regarding the latter two decades, “in the first phase of the zeitgeist, things seemed so good that people found themselves wondering why anyone would need religion. In the second, reality seemed so bleak that religion’s proffered hope and comfort seemed superficial and unrealistic” (p. 282). This chapter continues with sections on thematic tones of the age plus a formal analysis of time duration, spatial and social scope, narrative course, characteristic “carrying” groups and media, crucial events, embodying public figures and celebrities, symbolic and artistic expressions, styles of attire and presentation of self, and common slogans.

The following section of this chapter constructs an analytical model of zeitgeist cultural assumptions which could have served as a chapter on its own, as it presented “in *condensed propositional form* the kinds of statements that people *would* make about their cultural cognition *if they were fully self-aware, honest, and articulate* about their true assumptions and beliefs organized in their cultural models” (p. 298, emphasis in original). The list here is 35 propositions and 30 pages long. The obvious conclusion of these beliefs is that “traditional religion is obsolete—redundant and unnecessary at best, outdated, discredited, and damaging at worst” (p. 330). Nevertheless, and perhaps most significantly, the final section of this chapter points to the re-enchantment of American culture via growing fascination with spirituality and occulture, which is

absolutely essential to understanding this book’s argument. Religion did not become obsolete because secularity won the day. *Religion lost out in good measure because alternatives that are actually more like religion than secularism emerged as cultural options that proved attractive to many post-Boomers. . .* Traditional religion has to compete against spirituality and occulture. But so does secularism. . . If anything, while occulture and spirituality represent functional *replacements* for traditional religion, they are outright *rejections* of core premises of secularism. The jury is still out, it would seem, on whether replacement or rejection is the more threatening possibility for traditional religion. (p. 335, emphasis in original)

The book closes with Chapter 10: Through the Exit Doors. All the religious turn-offs and explanations for leaving religion generated by Smith’s detailed data are listed and summarized, as always differentiated by generations, and compared to other datasets. The chapter also provides more nuanced analysis of three important minority traditions: Jewish Millennials, Black

Protestant Millennials, and Mormon Millennials. However, Smith concludes by questioning or at least qualifying the standard secularization thesis of the inevitable effects of modernization.

Religious obsolescence in the United States has not meant the disappearance of the sacred, spiritual, magical, enchanted, supernatural, occult, ecstatic, or divine. They remain alive and well. The sacred and ecstatic have migrated to new locations. . . Max Weber would smile wryly about American religion helping to dig its own grave. But he would be confounded by the reversal of disenchantment in contemporary American culture. (p. 368-369)

The remaining few pages of the book can also be found in the format of a short article on Notre Dame's website: [Why Religion Went Obsolete: Not by Secularization Alone | Church Life Journal | University of Notre Dame](#) .

As for what Smith's book bypasses, it would have been beneficial to examine alternative forms of the sacred and the recent resurgence of white Christian nationalism in America, both of which Smith acknowledges but does not explore in much depth. An international comparison of deep cultures and zeitgeists in other nations would also have been instructive, as Canadian and European societies are well known to be more "secular" than American society. But these interests are simply beyond the purview of Smith's seminal work which already delivers more food for thought than can be easily digested. And as for the timing of the text, many readers will be left with an unsatiated appetite for further analysis of the impact of the second Trump administration on religion. But the book was published just as that administration took office, so that assessment awaits the future.

Overall, Christian Smith's evidence of, and argument for the obsolescence of religion is overwhelming. Personally, it compels readers to reflect deeply on whether they themselves characterize their generation, on what cultural movement they were aware of and who they were as individuals during the successive decades, and on how their generational cultural contexts differ from their parents' and children's contexts. Academically, the endorsement on the back cover of the book by equally esteemed cultural sociologist James Davison Hunter, author of the era-defining *Culture Wars* (1991), places Smith's book well: "This is an era-defining work. What Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* was in the 1950s, what Lenski's *The Religious Factor* was in the 1960s, and what Wuthnow's *Restructuring of American Religion* was in the 1990s, Christian Smith's *Why Religion Went Obsolete* is to the early twenty-first century." I heartily agree.

Dennis Hiebert
University of Manitoba, Canada