

Why Fewer Attend Church Today?

Why is church attendance decreasing as time moves forward? There are many reasons that come to mind from my experience as a retired Episcopal priest. In most of the developed nations, like those of Europe, attendance is already extremely low. According to Jeffrey Weiss, a correspondent for "Politics Daily", *"Religion in America is on the decline and has been dropping since the turn of the century. That's not an atheist's happy dream. It's the conclusion of researchers at Faith Communities Today (FACT), the multi-year study of American religion quarterbacked by the Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research."* While he admits that statistics vary he pointed out that this particular report relied on information coming from pastors and religious leaders who might have wanted to say something more favorable. It is not just church attendance then that is in decline but religion itself. [<http://www.politicsdaily.com/2009/09/11/religion-in-america-in-decline/>]

In an April 9, 2009 article by Jon Meacham for Newsweek Magazine, "The End of Christian America", he says, "The percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 points in the past two decades. How that statistic explains who we are now—and what, as a nation, we are about to become.

"It was a small detail, a point of comparison buried in the fifth paragraph on the 17th page of a 24-page summary of the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey. But as R. Albert Mohler Jr.—president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the largest on earth—read over the document after its release in March, he was struck by a single sentence. For a believer like Mohler—a starved, unflinchingly conservative Christian, steeped in the theology of his particular province of the faith, devoted to producing ministers who will preach the inerrancy of the Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the only means to eternal life—the central news of the survey was troubling enough: the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent. Then came the point he could not get out of his mind: while the unaffiliated have historically been concentrated in the Pacific Northwest, the report said, "this pattern has now changed, and the Northeast emerged in 2008 as the new stronghold of the religiously unidentified." As Mohler saw it, the historic foundation of America's religious culture was cracking." [<http://www.newsweek.com/2009/04/03/the-end-of-christian-america.html>]

Culture

With the "smaller" world in which we live and because of instant communications and faster means of travel we are aware of the many different cultures among us. It demonstrates that one culture is not necessarily superior nor better than another. We are growing to understand that one size does not fit all even if we do not always find it easy to respect others who differ. Later in the above article for Newsweek Jon continues, *"While we remain a nation decisively shaped by religious faith, our politics and our culture are, in the main, less influenced by movements and arguments of an explicitly Christian character than they were even five years ago. I think this is a good thing—good for our political culture, which, as the American Founders saw, is complex and charged enough without attempting to compel or coerce religious belief or observance."* In this very lengthy article he eventually refers to the thoughts of an early church father, St. Augustine, "If we apply an Augustinian test of nationhood to ourselves, we find that liberty, not religion, is what holds us together. In "The City of God," Augustine—converted sinner and bishop of Hippo—said that a nation should be defined as "a multitude of rational beings in common agreement as to the objects of their love." What we value most highly—what we collectively love most—is thus the central test of the social contract."

This spirit is basically what our founders believed and spelled out in our Constitution concerning the separation of church and state to disallow that any one religion would be primary but that all religions and human values were to be heard and respected. *"This way of life is far different from what many overtly conservative Christians would like. But that is the power of the republican system engineered by James Madison at the end of the 18th century: that America would survive in direct relation to its ability to check extremism and preserve maximum*

personal liberty. Religious believers should welcome this; freedom for one sect means freedom for all sects." Meacham reminds us as his article continues. "To promote the dogmatism of any single faith or belief only breeds strife and division. To work for inclusion and mutual respect for the ideas of others, according to St. Augustine, enables "a multitude of rational beings in common agreement as to the objects of their love." A people respecting and loving one another as we each are loved by God our Creator. May this grace of this maturity promote our becoming one nation under God."

We can be certain about one fact, change is not new and it will never go away. From the beginning of creation change began and has continued. Every aspect of life as we know it is evolving from what we consider innate material and even in the social orders that have been originated by humankind. The sad thing for me, as a religious leader, is the resistance of almost every religion and its fervor to resist change. Unfortunately this attitude and reluctance to change not only has a negative effect on religion but it has brought death and devastation.

Education

All fields of knowledge and education have advanced with great speed in recent time. These advances have caused the development of specialties that branch off to study and research, especially in the areas of medicine. Not too long ago, since the time of my youth, one might aspire to become a medical doctor. That decision is no longer so simple. There is hardly an area of medicine that does not have multiple specialties so the choice is not simple nor is the study necessary to accomplish one's decision.

Scientific study and development seems to be a special problem for many religious people. Many are not amused nor fascinated by what they hear and do not seem to have an inclination to seek clarification. Their skepticism tends to produce fear more than answers since it is common for us to react with fear toward that which we do not fully understand. This tends to distance the thinking of those who seek easy answers and causes them to lash out with empty rhetoric and rebuttal. An example would be their reactions to scientific theory as if it was a proposition without substantiated facts. Here is a paragraph from a paper I wrote posted on - [<http://janddhealth.intuitwebsites.com/ArtRelativityofGodandPeople.pdf>]

"While we still do not have all the answers, we have grown much in this pursuit. Many will say that it is just a theory in order to dismiss the findings of modern Physics and related sciences, but that does not solve much either. It may be important here to explain what is meant by a theory among the scientific community. "In common usage, the word theory is often used to signify a conjecture, an opinion, a speculation, or a hypothesis. In this usage, a theory is not necessarily based on facts; in other words, it is not required to be consistent with the true descriptions of reality." (Wikipedia) "In science a theory is a testable model of the manner of interaction of a set of natural phenomena, capable of predicting future occurrences or observations of the same kind, and capable of being tested through experiment or otherwise verified through empirical observation." (Wikipedia) Another definition for scientific theory is "an assumption or system of assumptions, accepted principles, and rules of procedure based on limited information or knowledge, devised to analyze, predict, or otherwise explain the nature or behavior of a specified set of phenomena; abstract reasoning". (MSN Encarta)

We need to encourage respectful dialog with each other with a desire for mutual and honest interactions. I believe this is why many of our youth and younger adults are absenting themselves from religious involvement. A theory in science makes no eternal claims for an unchanging truth. A theory can and will change if further empirical evidence shows variations from former evidence. Truth for science is changed without hesitation or apology as new experiments and mathematical formulas may reveal. Religion tends to promote the notion that their truths never change and cannot ever change. When dogmas are changed, as many are, have been, and will

be, it takes years of verbal contention, accusations, and even physical violence. How can we forget the arrogance of hundreds of years by the church over the early theory that the earth was round and not flat and that the earth revolved around the sun? It was only recently that Galileo was exonerated from the judgement of heresy while his theory was actually true. Religion continues today insisting that its scriptures are inerrant and eternal truth when even their scriptures tell us that it is the heavens that declare the glory of God. Perhaps it is time for religion to join with science in recognizing that truth develops over time and that humanity has only grasped a small portion in its discoveries and can never claim infallibility.

In science today there are some, like Paul Davies, who states that both science and religion are "*founded on faith — namely, on belief in the existence of something outside the universe, like an unexplained God or an unexplained set of physical laws, maybe even a huge ensemble of unseen universes, too. For that reason, both monotheistic religion and orthodox science fail to provide a complete account of physical existence.*

This shared failing is no surprise, because the very notion of physical law is a theological one in the first place, a fact that makes many scientists squirm. Isaac Newton first got the idea of absolute, universal, perfect, immutable laws from the Christian doctrine that God created the world and ordered it in a rational way. Christians envisage God as upholding the natural order from beyond the universe, while physicists think of their laws as inhabiting an abstract transcendent realm of perfect mathematical relationships.

And just as Christians claim that the world depends utterly on God for its existence, while the converse is not the case, so physicists declare a similar asymmetry: the universe is governed by eternal laws (or meta-laws), but the laws are completely impervious to what happens in the universe." [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/24/opinion/24davies.html?_r=1]

It seems to me there is no hope of ever explaining why the physical universe is as it is so long as we are fixated on immutable laws or meta-laws that exist without reason or are imposed by divine providence. The alternative is to regard the laws of physics and the universe they govern as part and parcel of a unitary system, and to be incorporated together within a common explanatory scheme. In other words, the laws should have an explanation from within the universe and not involve appealing to an external agency. The specifics of that explanation are a matter for future research. But until science comes up with a testable theory of the laws of the universe, its claim to be free of faith is manifestly bogus.

We now live in a world where knowledge is openly available to everyone who is literate around the globe. The Internet makes it possible along with our libraries. The media instantly tells us about things happening in places far and near. Our youth are growing up with technology and are more capable than many adults in these marvels of research and communication. People today are in touch with not only what is going on but also familiar with the multiplicity of cultures and ideas. This makes it very difficult for any individual or group to claim exclusivity to superior and ultimate truth. More than ever we must learn to love our neighbors as ourselves and recognize that our neighborhood is much larger than in former times.

Economics

"The economics of religion" (website) *How does religion affect the economy? How do economic factors impact religious choices? With a few exceptions, economists have largely kept their practical mitts off the mystical topic of faith – until recently. Now scholars in huge numbers are analyzing the intersection of faith and economics. They include people from a range of disciplines from across the United States and around the world, and students doing cutting-edge work. The excitement has even inspired an organization dedicated to the economics of religion, which formally kicked off in fall 2004 with a conference that attracted international research papers. Why it Matters: People's beliefs affect practical decisions in everyday life, including economic ones, and religious organizations can be powerful players in the secular realms of government and politics.* [http://www.religionlink.com/tip_050131b.php - se]

In their book, Sacred Trust - The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm by Robert B. Ekelund, Robert D. Tollison, Gary M. Anderson, Robert F. Hébert and Audrey B. Davidson, they offer this description, *"Without meaning to be irreverent, it is fair to say that in the Middle Ages, at the height of its political and economic power, the Roman Catholic Church functioned in part as a powerful and sophisticated corporation. The Church dealt in a "product" many consumers felt they had to have: the salvation of their immortal souls. The Pope served as its CEO, the College of Cardinals as its board of directors, bishoprics and monasteries as its franchises. And while the Church certainly had moral and social goals, this early antecedent to AT&T and General Motors had economic motives and methods as well, seeking to maximize profits by eliminating competitors and extending its markets."* [<http://www.us.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Economics/History/?view=usa&ci=0195103378>]

Today there are volumes written about economics and how it relates to all religions. No religious institution can exist without financial support and there is no doubt that religion has a significant influence, both good and bad, on the economy of our world. With the evolution of time, in every respect, especially in the areas of culture and education the earlier need for the religious structures, needless to say, has changed dramatically as well. We can see this economic shift in various areas like; charity, counseling, schooling, and many other basic areas of our common life together. In the longer view of human history these basic areas of human need were not formalized. It was not too long ago that religious communities began to take leadership in organizing schools for children and showing care for those in need.

The beginning of established schools may have been The King's School in Canterbury England in the sixth century. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_King%27s_School,_Canterbury] In almost every century thereafter there was a gradual increase in the number and variety of schools established. The majority of schools and colleges had the backing of the Crown or the Church. When you get to the sixteenth century there was a significant influx of new centers of academia. From 1500 - 1598, however, the great majority were in England. With the dawn of the seventeenth century educational and other service institutions for the populous were spreading to many parts of the world. Until the end of the nineteenth century the majority of education was provided for and supported by religious affiliation. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_oldest_schools_in_the_world]

While counseling began with religion in later years, especially in our times now, it is mainly a practice of Psychology in the field of medicine. The history of counseling is rich and varied but these two paragraphs quoted here will give a brief summary.

"Christian counseling has been a part of the work of ministry from the origin of the Church. "Every since apostolic times, counseling has occurred in the Church as a natural function of corporate spiritual life." Paul made it clear that he considered the family of God competent to counsel one another when the need arose. He said, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct (counsel) one another" (Romans 15:14 NIV)."

"In time, Christian ministers began to be aware that they were no longer looked to for answers on problems of living, as they once were. Indeed, the unspoken consensus was that Christianity did not have answers for these new problems. Not only did the humanists believe this; Christians themselves came to hold the same position. The liberals in the Church addressed these serious problems of living by Christians, either by "deferring and referring" to "those properly trained to deal with 'real' problems," (psychologists or psychiatrist) or by obtaining the psychological training that would equip them to this task. The conservatives saw the problem as a lack of commitment, bible study, prayer, and faithful attendance of all the church services. In other words, they denied its existence." [<http://ezinearticles.com/?History-of-Counseling&id=3466662>]

"Charity was a part of western civilization long before it was nationalized. Charity has been a virtue recognized and fostered by religion throughout human history. Christian charity has been an integral part of European civilization. In medieval Europe the Church bore the responsibility for organizing and promoting poor relief and it was not until the 16th century that the state began to take over this responsibility." [<http://www.ourcivilisation.com/cooray/btof/chap242.htm>]

As you can see from this paragraph from the web, charity was also fostered by religion but, as time moved forward, it too has become an integral part of our secular fabric of life. It is hard to know what percentage of charity is from strictly religious sources in our world today.

Welcome

Last but certainly not least - perhaps the most important reason for fewer coming to church today. Another word for welcome is hospitality. "Hospitality is not merely making space for somebody else, it's about letting people into your hearts and letting them change you". [The Rev. Canon Timothy Boggs, Washington National Cathedral]

These words, All Are Welcome, are used on many signs for churches and other groups who gather, imply full hospitality. I admire the seeming intention of these words because they not only reflect the extent of God's love for everyone but they echo the spirit of our United States Bill of Rights and our Constitution. It is almost natural therefore to see that All Are Welcome on so many signs.

It is not uncommon that many people say things that they believe they mean but too often neglect by their actions toward others. This malady is reflected in a popular statement that would remind us, "actions speak louder than words". Words are very important indeed since they are indicators of our intentions but are rather empty if there is no corresponding action to make them effective. It is important to say I love you to those for whom you care but it is more important that you show that love by tangible expressions.

Everyone basically understands the first two words, All Are, but perhaps we need some help on the meaning of Welcome. Here is an acronym that may help:

WELCOME – **W**illingly **E**ngage **L**imitless **C**are **O**pening **M**ore **E**quality

A true welcome requires CHANGE; a word that we understand but find hard to like and execute. It is especially difficult for those who are comfortable where and how they are. This is why it is easier for welcome to mean that the newer folk who join them will be expected to adapt and change to the existing demeanor of the group they are joining. True welcome, however, will bring change to both the existing community and the new members. The physical principle states, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction". Perhaps this best describes why and how change will occur for both the older and newer members. Since change is so hard for so many to accept we can see why a real welcoming community will feel stress and discomfort in the process.

Only when both the community and the newcomers are willing to limitless engagement in a open and caring manner will the needed equality and true welcome be a result. Because All Are Welcome is so life changing for everyone involved it is very difficult to experience in fact. It is hard for people to be open enough to practice regularly and easily the function of All Are Welcome. It is always easier to welcome those who are placid and pliable and tend to "fit in" almost without notice. It is always more difficult for opposites to attract without a genuine love for the humanity that is there.

The fact is, as we often hear, that opposites attract. Two people who are basically alike cannot achieve as much as when two people who are not so much alike come together. The reason is simple. Two people with similar

gifts and thought will not have the impetus for growth and development as two people with differing thoughts and talents! We know this to be a fact genetically so our laws do not allow inbreeding. Groups who primarily continue to propagate their heredity of unchanging tradition may not flourish well either. The best example of the value of inclusiveness is our own United States of America – the melting pot of many nations and peoples.

In short, it is far easier to say All Are Welcome than to live All Are Welcome, but if it is not our “lifestyle” then our chances of health and well being as a community is very slim.

For all of these reasons and more, I believe we are seeing a decline in the number of people who affiliate with and attend our churches. People move often today from one place to another, as we have become a mobile society. It is interesting to note that, when they move, they do not necessarily attend nor affiliate with the same denomination. Brand loyalty, as it were, is not the way it used to be in years past. Change often brings more change as people get used to having movement and development in their daily lives. If their experience with church in their former location was especially meaningful then they may search for a similar community in which to continue that experience in their new area. When they choose to look, the web is probably the most important place for their search. When they visit, if the church seems to be as it was described in their website, they may choose to affiliate and participate. The most important part of any church today is perhaps learning how to tell their story effectively and honestly so that people around them may see why they might feel welcomed. Mega churches do this very well and, because of their larger size, often have the variety that meets the needs and interests of more people.