



The Polis  
Center

*We bring things  
into perspective.*

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## COLLEAGUES:

*Predicting the future is tricky, and if you do have an inkling of what's coming, doing something about it can be even trickier.*

*Some observers have predicted that major changes are coming our way in worship services, in the make-up of congregations, in the duties of pastors, and in other aspects of religious practice. Some even believe there is a second "Reformation" on the horizon. You'll read about that in the essay below.*

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# CLERGY NOTES

## READINGS ON RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND THE NEW REFORMATION

For the past three decades, many observers of American religion have argued that a reformation is either under way or just around the corner. This supposed reformation has little to do with church attendance, which has remained fairly constant throughout much of the 20th century. Rather, the reformation has to do with fundamental changes in the nature of religion and spirituality—"a quantum leap from anything we have seen in the past," as one observer put it.

The previous issue of *Clergy Notes* described the rise of alternative worship services that reach out to people who are disaffected by traditional worship styles. These alternative services ride on deep cultural currents that may be taking American religion into uncharted territory.

An early indication of something new in the wind came in Sydney Ahlstrom's book, *A Religious History of the American People*, written in the 1970s. Ahlstrom observed that in the aftermath of the 1960s, "doubts, despair and moral confusion were endemic." Noting the chaotic and dispirited condition of the nation's religious institutions in that era, he asserted that "radically revised foundations of belief were being laid," and

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## READINGS

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that a "drastic reformation" was in the offing.

According to some, the future is now upon us. In the Summer 1999 issue of the journal *Religion and American Culture*, sociologist Wade Clark Roof writes, "The American religious landscape is in the throes of a major reconfiguration. Old boundaries are blurring, new ones are emerging." (See the interview with *Religion and American Culture*'s managing editor Thomas J. Davis in "Straight from the Source.")

In his book *Spiritual Marketplace*, published last year, Roof acknowledges that American religion is always, in some sense, in the midst of a reformation: "Americans are always starting out on a new spiritual venture," he writes. "But there does appear to be something distinctive about today's spiritual mood." He notes that belief in traditional notions of the divine has declined, along with denominational loyalties. Two-thirds of people born before World War II claimed a "strong" religious preference, compared to only 40 percent of those born after the war. But disenchantment with organized religion is just one side of the coin.

The other side, Roof says, is a turning inward in search of meaning. Some of these inward-seekers draw a distinction between the religious and the spiritual—seeing organized religion, like other institutions, as part of the problem, while spirituality is perceived as the cure. This is part of a general cultural trend that views spontaneous, intuitive feeling as somehow more "authentic" than systematic thought. Roof writes elsewhere that the quest for spirituality "involves nothing less than a radical protest against the values and outlook implicit in modernity—the post-Enlightenment, highly rational and scientific worldview of the past several hundred years."

In *Reinventing American Protestantism*, Donald Miller, professor of religion at the University of Southern California, examines the rapidly growing "new paradigm" churches—in particular the movements called Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel—arguing that they constitute nothing less than a second Reformation. New paradigm churches combine a conservative Evangelical theology with a contemporary cultural style, including popular-sounding music and facilities that may resemble shopping

malls more than they do traditional churches.

In *Shopping for Faith* (1998), journalists Richard Cimino and Don Lattin note that, "Churches that demand the most from their members will be the ones most likely to grow." They discuss the divide between religion and spirituality in America, and predict that it will grow only wider. While traditional religious adherents are gravitating toward conservative, rigorous forms of faith, the spirituality seekers are moving in the opposite direction toward highly individualized and unstructured beliefs.

The culprit they name is the one that Sydney Ahlstrom identified almost three decades ago. "The 1960s," they write, "which brought the sexual revolution and the breakdown of millions of American families, were also the turning point in this bitter divorce between religion and spirituality." The challenges to institutions and established cultural norms that characterized the decade polarized the country into two basic camps, that to this day remain estranged and bickering.

Whether the religious changes under way today are so drastic as to warrant the term "reformation" is debatable. However, the quest for spirituality and alternative approaches to religion are facts to be reckoned with. At the same time, there is no evidence that religious adherence is waning in the United States. The evidence does suggest that people are less loyal to denominations than in the past, and are unlikely to remain part of any congregation that doesn't play a relevant role in their lives.

— Ted Slutz

## RESOURCES

Results from "The Way We Live Now Poll" in the April 30, 2000 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* indicate that about half of all Americans consider themselves as religiously observant as their parents. The rest are split almost evenly between being more and less observant.

George Barna, of the Barna Research Group, tracks cultural trends of relevance to Christians based on surveys that his marketing firm conducts. He writes from a conservative, evangelical Christian perspective—but agree or disagree, these essays are valuable for

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## STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

A CONVERSATION WITH THOMAS J. DAVIS

**Thomas J. Davis has been the managing editor of *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* since its founding in 1989. The quarterly journal is published by the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. The journal's approach is multidisciplinary, accepting pieces from historical, sociological, and literary perspectives, among others. "What holds the articles together," Davis says, "is that all of them are case studies of American religious life that illuminate broader patterns or contexts. We take the subtitle very seriously: it's a journal of interpretation." Davis's own scholarly interests are Reformation Christianity and the Calvinist tradition in American history.**

**Clergy Notes:** Many observers have commented on the recent interest in spirituality among Americans. Is this interest something genuinely new?

**Davis:** In the past, spirituality was connected to religious institutions. You weren't spiritual by yourself. Your piety was expressed within a certain tradition. Now, Americans are very purposefully disconnecting spirituality from its traditional institutional bases, creating a do-it-yourself spirituality. They think of religion as being associated with institutions, and they've latched onto the term "spirituality" as something separate. That is a freeing of the notion of the quest for meaning. It's not that they're down on clergy, but there's this mentality that spirituality is something they can do for themselves.

**CN:** Is this "do-it-yourself" spirituality an outgrowth of the anti-institutionalism of the 1960s?

**Davis:** The 1960s seem to have unleashed a certain type of spirituality, one that places more emphasis on the individual. It's a lot easier now to patch together your own spirituality with resources found in the mass media: TV, radio, the Internet. Knowledge of and access to other religions, other traditions, has greatly increased. Part of it is simply the American mentality, which emphasizes personal freedom, picking and

choosing what you like. What is interesting is that this stuff is coming from somewhere. There are institutions behind it. But people seem to be more comfortable with that setup, because they're used to having a variety of companies providing goods and services. Religion and consumerism have always gone hand in hand, but now there are signs that make the connection unmistakable. Almost every major publisher is starting, or buying, a spirituality or religion imprint. The fastest-growing book club in the country, run by Doubleday, is a religious book club.

**CN:** Before the 1960s, scholars of American religion studied denominational history almost exclusively; now they examine a much broader range of topics. What's your opinion of this development?

**Davis:** It's a healthy development. There is some denominational history still being done, but there's much more interest in how American culture has shaped the denomination, and how the denomination has shaped the culture. The notion of religion being a product of culture has really opened the field to a lot of interesting studies. Individual religious lives, all these expressions of spirituality, are seen as being indicative or illuminative of things in the broader culture. It's given us a better perspective of how religion works in culture and at the individual level as well.

**CN:** Historians refer to "great awakenings" in American history—periods of intense religiosity and spirituality. Will our era one day be described as a great awakening?

**Davis:** The explicit ways that religion and politics interact now—that, I think, is going to look very different from the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's not that people weren't involved in politics before, but now the troops have been gathered, people have been mobilized, partly due to the new technology. Even if they don't call it a great awakening, people will see this as a period in which spirituality became a major force in the culture, if by no other measure than the sheer number of books bought.



## COLLEAGUES


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Chances are, you and your congregation are more likely to be affected by changes in the world at large. For example, what are the implications of an aging population? Will your sanctuary need to be made more accessible for folks in wheel-chairs and walkers? Will visits to shut-ins and those in hospital require more of your time? Will you need to rely more on communications media to reach those who can't come to you?

Changes in immigration, in banking and insurance practices, in law, in technology, in the cost of utilities, all can pose profound challenges—or open new opportunities—to congregations.

In the Resources section of this issue of Clergy Notes you'll find sources of information that can help you anticipate future trends. And don't forget the resources sitting in your pews. You may find that some in your congregation are working on the front lines of issues that will one day concern us all.

What resources have you discovered? I'd like to know—let's keep in touch.



Kevin R. Armstrong is minister of community ministries at Roberts Park United Methodist Church in downtown Indianapolis, and serves as senior public teacher of The Polis Center. You may write to Kevin at The Polis Center, call him at (317) 630-1667, or contact him by e-mail at [Clergynote@aol.com](mailto:Clergynote@aol.com).

## RESOURCES

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the data they report. One recent survey revealed that respondents rated friendliness, programs for children, and programs that serve the poor as three "extremely important" characteristics of a congregation. Find him on the Web at [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).

Beliefnet, at [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com), publishes material from all faiths and theological positions. Many of its articles are dedicated to issues that confront congregations in the modern and post-modern contexts. Particularly noteworthy are Beliefnet's special Family section and its list of links to sites that would be of use in planning almost any sort of program or outreach. Under the "Health" topic, for example, there are useful resources for any congregation interested in parish nursing.

An essential resource for anyone interested in cultural trends is the magazine *American Demographics*, at [www.demographics.com](http://www.demographics.com). The publication is intended for business leaders, but provides information on topics relevant to religious organizations as well. The "Zeitgeist" column of the April, 2000 issue, for example, discusses the implications of America's aging population—and why, in about the year 2050, there will be a shift in the nation's "core values."

Finally, for a broad approach to the future, don't overlook the best-sellers written by John Naisbitt (*Megatrends*) and Faith Popcorn (*The Popcorn Report*.)



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The Polis Center  
IUPUI  
1200 Waterway Blvd, Suite 100  
Indianapolis, IN 46202-2157

(317) 274-2455  
e-mail: [polis@iupui.edu](mailto:polis@iupui.edu)  
[www.thepoliscenter.iupui.edu](http://www.thepoliscenter.iupui.edu)

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