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American Christianity Is Due for a Revival

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Byline: Timothy Keller

Body

Upon joining the Presbyterian ministry, in the mid-1970s, I served in a town outside Richmond, Virginia. New church buildings were going up constantly. When I arrived in Manhattan in the late '80s, however, I saw a startling sight. There on the corner of Sixth Avenue and West 20th Street was a beautiful Gothic **Revival** brownstone built in 1844 that had once been the Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion. Now it was the Limelight, an epicenter of the downtown club scene. Thousands of people a night showed up for drugs and sex and the possibility of close encounters with the famous of the cultural avant garde. It was a vivid symbol of a culture that had rejected **Christianity**.

I began to notice "repurposed" church buildings all over the city. They were now condominiums, gyms, art galleries, coffee shops, pubs, and clubs, a trend that continued as my time in the city went on. In 2014 the New York Archdiocese of the Catholic Church announced that it was closing dozens of empty church buildings, and hundreds of other Protestant congregations faced dwindling membership and were unable to maintain their church homes.

[From the October 1942 issue: Will the Christian Church survive?]

In moving to New York City, I had entered a different world than the one I'd known in Virginia. Here society was secularizing; religion in general and **Christianity** in particular were in sharp decline. In 1989 my family and I started Redeemer, a new church in Manhattan. We faced cultural attitudes toward **Christianity** that ran from deep indifference to mockery to shouting-out-loud hostility. Meanwhile, in the middle of the country, churches continued to multiply and some grew to enormous sizes.

What I've experienced in New York for decades has now spread across the country. As of 2021, the number of "religious nones"-people who don't identify with any established religion-in the U.S. had grown to nearly 30 percent of the population while professing Christians constituted 63 percent, down from 75 only a decade ago. The Pew Research Center recently projected the future of this trend: In three of its four scenarios, the percentage of Christians plunges to less than half the population by 2070, and in none does the trend reverse and the Church grow.

Should we expect to see most church buildings in the country repurposed or torn down? Is it inevitable that we will become an ex-Christian society, or could the Church experience a renewal?

Why should anyone besides Christians like me care whether the Church revives? Many Americans would say the fate of the Church is inconsequential to them. Others want very much to see the Church continue to shrink. I believe both attitudes are mistaken.

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Many secular social theorists—including [[%omile Durkheim and Jonathan Haidt, to name two—show how religion makes contributions to society that cannot be readily supplied by other sources. Cultural unity, Durkheim argued in the 1890s, requires a "conscience collective," a set of shared moral norms that bind us together in a sustained way. These norms are understood to be grounded in something sacred and transcendent, not created by culture. Durkheim recognized the difficulties secular cultures have in cultivating moral beliefs that are strong and unquestionable enough to unite people.

[Faith Hill: They tried to start a church without God. For a while, it worked.]

Consider the evolution of America. In the classic 1985 book Habits of the Heart, the sociologist Robert Bellah and his co-authors showed that the social history of the United States made it the most individualistic culture in the world. American culture elevates the interests of the individual over those of family, community, and nation. Yet for two centuries, Americans' religious devotion counterbalanced this individualism with denunciations of self-centeredness and calls to love your neighbor. The Church demanded charity and compassion for the needy, it encouraged young people to confine sexual expression to marriage, and it encouraged spouses to stick to their vows. Bellah wrote that American individualism, now largely freed from the counterbalance of religion, is headed toward social fragmentation, economic inequality, family breakdown, and many other dysfunctions.

At a local level, churches provide community and support to people in their congregations who lack strong family ties or other kinds of emotional and social support. They also serve neighbors who do not attend church, particularly in poorer neighborhoods. More than 20 years ago, a University of Pennsylvania study of Philadelphia congregations concluded, "Congregations are vital to the social fabric of Philadelphia and take a major role in caring for the needs of people in the neighborhoods." The study authors estimated the replacement costs of churches to communities and government would be about \$250 million annually, in 2001 dollars—in the Philadelphia metro area alone.

While a revival of the Church would benefit society, that will never happen if the Church thinks of itself as just another social-service agency. Christians seek spiritual renewal of the Church not because they see religion as having social utility, nor because they want to shore up their own institutions. First and foremost, Christianity helps society because its metaphysical claims are true; they are not true because Christianity helps society. When Christians lose sight of this, the Church's power and durability are lost.

S Can Christianity grow again? Yes it can. Even the Pew report concedes that "events outside the study's model" could lead to a revival of Christianity. The events mentioned include "immigration patterns or religious innovations."

First, as I see it, growth can happen if the Church learns how to speak compellingly to non-Christian people. For a millennium, Western institutions instilled in most citizens Christian beliefs about morality and sex, God and sin, and an afterlife. If non-Christian people entered a church, what they heard was likely not strange or offensive to them. That has changed, but the Church has not yet learned how to communicate to outsiders. As a result, most evangelical churches can reach only the shrinking and aging enclaves of socially conservative people.

But change is possible. In our church in Manhattan, over the years, we learned to reach young secular progressives by adopting the way St. Paul told the good news to nonbelievers in his own day, as described in I Corinthians 1:22"24. He affirmed their best aspirations and longings, yet challenged the inadequate ways in which they were seeking to realize these hopes, and redirected them toward Jesus Christ.

Second, the Church in the U.S. can grow again if it learns how to unite justice and righteousness. I have heard African American pastors use this terminology to describe the historic ministry of the Black Church. By righteousness they meant that the Church has maintained its traditional beliefs in the authority of the Bible, morality, and sexuality. It calls individuals to be born again through faith in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. By justice, they meant that the Church has an activist stance against all forms of oppression.

White Protestant churches in America tend to pick one or the other. Liberal mainline Protestantism stresses justice but has largely jettisoned ancient affirmations of the Christian creeds, such as the preexistence and divinity of Jesus, the bodily resurrection, and the authority of the Bible. Evangelicalism stresses righteousness and traditional

values, but many congregations are indifferent or even hostile toward work against injustice. However, if the Church at large could combine these two ideas the way the Black Church has, it can begin to rebuild both credibility and relevance, rebutting the charge that it is merely another political power broker. A church that unites justice and righteousness does not fit with the left on abortion and sexual ethics or with the right on race and justice. Instead it is a community that addresses the timeless longings of all people for meaning, hope, love, and salvation.

Third, the Church in the U.S. can grow again if it embraces the global and multiethnic character of **Christianity**. By 2050 nearly one in five **Americans** will be foreign-born, and these immigrants will likely come from the more religious parts of the world. Immigrants bring their faith with them. **Christianity** in East Asia grew from 1.2 percent of the population in 1970 to 10.5 percent of the population in 2020. In turn, Chinese and Korean immigrant communities have started as many as hundreds of churches in New York alone since the late 1970s. Protestantism in Latin **America** has also grown explosively, particularly through the Pentecostal and evangelical denominations, and these Christians are coming to the U.S. The combination of secular **Americans** having fewer children and the increasing immigration of religious people leads some observers to argue that secularization is likely to stall in **America** by 2050.

Established majority-white denominations often welcome "ethnic congregations" in order to grow their numbers, but don't always open the doors of power and leadership to them. If the fast-growing nonwhite U.S. churches are supported by the Church's power structure in a non-paternalistic way, and if their leaders are consistently embraced and included at all levels, then the public face of the Church will look very different and much more credible.

Fourth, the Church in the U.S. can grow again if it strikes a dynamic balance between innovation and conservation. A church must conserve historic Christian teaching. If a church simply adopts the beliefs of the culture, it will die, because it has nothing unique to offer. But the Church has always, especially in times when the faith seemed moribund, introduced unexpected innovations.

There was no such thing as monasticism-through which pagan Northern Europe was turned Christian-until there was. There was no Reformation until there was. There was no **revival** that turned Methodists and Baptists into culturally dominant forces in the midwestern and southeastern United States-until there was. There was no East African **Revival**, led primarily by African people, that helped turn Africa from a 9 percent Christian continent in 1900 into a 50 percent Christian continent today-until there was. **Christianity**, like its founder, does not go from strength to strength but from death to resurrection.

Fifth, the Church has in its favor what the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor called "the unquiet frontiers of modernity." He makes the case that Western culture is deeply conflicted about faith and God. Modern secularism holds that people are only physical entities without souls, that sensations of love and beauty are just neurological-chemical events, that there is no meaning other than what we construct, and that there is no right or wrong outside of what we in our minds choose. Yet most people feel that life is greater than what can be accounted for by naturalistic explanations.

The modern self is exceptionally fragile. While having the freedom to define and validate oneself is superficially liberating, it is also exhausting: You and you alone must create and sustain your identity. This has contributed to unprecedented levels of depression and anxiety and never-satisfied longings for affirmation. The modern self is also fragmenting, as Bellah argued, its individualism leading to the erosion of family, community, and unity of shared values in the nation. The breakdown of neighborhoods and communities means that, more and more, our lives are run by faceless, massive bureaucracies and inhumane technologies aimed solely at economic efficiency.

In stark contrast, **Christianity** offers grace and covenant. Protestant **Christianity** teaches its members that salvation is by sheer grace, not by one's moral efforts or performance. We are adopted as sons and daughters of God, so the cosmic ruler becomes our unconditionally loving heavenly father. And all who unite with God as father are brought into a family of faith, which is based not on contractual relationships, sustained only as long as they benefit both parties' interests, but covenant relationships, in which all parties pledge to serve one another in sacrificial love.

What may happen is this: Even though the secular world markets its highly individualistic view of the self as objective and universal, the rest of the world sees that it is parochially Western and shot through with nonempirical assumptions about human nature. As time goes on, secular **Americans** may begin to see that the rest of the world

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has developed cultures that are modern but nonetheless religious. Young, secular **Americans** may feel themselves to be in a kind of wasteland and begin to question their unbelief. All of this, Taylor thinks, may cause secularism to "become less plausible over time."

All of these factors in **Christianity's** favor will not necessarily trigger a renewal. For that to happen, three things need to be accomplished by at least a significant sector of the U.S. Church.

The escape from political captivity. **American** evangelicals have largely responded to the decline of the Church by turning to a political project of regaining power in order to expel secular people from places of cultural influence. But a demographically shrinking Church that identifies heavily with one narrow band of political actors will not be relevant in **America**. A dynamically growing body of believers making visible sacrifices for the good of their neighbors, on the other hand, may indeed shape the culture, mainly through attraction rather than compulsion.

[From the January/February 2023 issue: The reinvention of the Catholic Church]

A union of "extraordinary prayer." All religions promote and call for prayer. But historically, during times of fast growth and renewal, Christian movements have been marked by an extraordinary amount of communal prayer. During the early years of the explosive Christian movement in Korea, all-night prayer meetings were common, and they remain so in many parts of the country to this day. During the 18th-century Great Awakening in **America**, Jonathan Edwards wrote of the "explicit agreement and visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer for the **revival** of religion." Unions of believers for prayer-both large and small gatherings-have an empowering effect. The renewed growth of the Church in the U.S. will not happen without it.

The distinguishing of the gospel from moralism. In a relativistic culture the Church will have to clearly declare that there are moral absolutes-which will be unpopular, to say the least. It will be called domineering and abusive, but it must not flinch. Yet there is danger on the other side too.

The Christian gospel is that we are fully forgiven by God because of what Christ has done, not because of anything we have done. In traditional Protestant thought, there are two ways to lose one's grasp on this gospel. The most obvious is "antinomianism," the belief that I can live any way I wish. But the other way is legalism, the belief that through my moral goodness I can put God in my debt, so he is obligated to bless and favor me. Both reject God as Savior and make you your own savior and Lord.

Langdon Gilkey was a young man in China during World War II and was confined to an Japanese-run internment camp, as he recounts in Shantung Compound. Also imprisoned with him was Eric Liddell, the former Olympic star and missionary to China whose story inspired the film Chariots of Fire. Gilkey, who was not a Christian believer when he was interned, is honest about how the many missionaries in the cramped and difficult conditions of the camp not only behaved in selfish and ungenerous ways, but often added sanctimonious rationales for their behavior. Liddell, however, stood out. He poured himself out for others and was overflowing with humor, kindness, and an unmistakable inner peace. When Liddell died suddenly of a brain tumor, all mourned.

Gilkey concluded that religion and moralism do not produce love. Often they make self-centeredness worse, especially when they lead, as they will, to pride in one's moral accomplishments. Liddell, however, believed the gospel of sheer grace through Christ. In Liddell, Gilkey had a picture of what we could be if we are at the same moment humbled yet profoundly lifted high by the knowledge of God's unconditional love through undeserved grace. Gilkey, quoting the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote: "Religion is not the place where the problem of man's egotism is automatically solved. Rather the ultimate battle [takes place] between human pride and God's grace."

For the first five years after my family and I started Redeemer in Manhattan, we saw seasons of remarkable spiritual **revival** and growth. Scores of people embraced faith who most would have considered unlikely to be Christian converts. Looking back on that time, the most important reason for this was that we were offering God's grace as a unique path, different from either religious moralism or secular relativism. And going forward, a renewed Christian Church must focus on this identity-altering, life-changing, community-forming message in the same way.

Is **Christianity** going away in the U.S.? No. And although no one can predict when it will happen and how rapidly it will happen, there are many reasons to believe that growth will resume.

But it will not happen until the Church applies this famous saying of Jesus to itself: "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." If the Church aims at loving service to one's neighbor while clearly speaking the truth, it will grow again and may have cultural influence. But if it aims at influence rather than humble service, it will have neither.

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