

Where do these impressions come from, and are they accurate? Many reasons have been advanced for American religious exceptionalism. For example, Stark and his colleagues have argued that in most countries there has been only one established religion, while in the United States many different religions compete—a much better marketing situation. If we could buy only one cereal, those of us who do not like it might stop eating cereal. Of course, the advertising budgets for cereal are enormous, which no doubt supports the American addiction to these morning grains. At the same time, if one looks at religion as a commodity, one also realizes that expenditures on promoting religion are much, much higher. Consider all the TV shows and ads on TV, in newspapers, and now on the Internet. At 2 AM one night I found at least seven different programs promoting religion. Even more tellingly, we pay more than 300,000 clergymen to give sermons that are mostly about convincing parishioners that they should be faithful.

An alternative argument is that religion thrives in America because the nation is so ethnically, geographically, and religiously diverse. Each group clings to its religion as a means of preserving its community and culture. And, as we noted earlier churches do continue to play an important role in providing services for people in need that the more generous welfare states in European countries take care of. In European countries the state does more to provide medical, social, and educational services. In the United States, public schools are underfunded; many people cannot get health insurance; the police are often ethnically alien to minorities and the poor; most jobs are not unionized and unions cannot help most people with difficulties at work; and so forth. In the absence of strong and available alternative institutions, Americans turn to their churches for hope, help, and sustenance.

But the primary evidence cited by foreigners suggesting Americans are very religious is political. Many of the social issues that have become important in recent decades have done so primarily because of the rising power and influence of evangelical, conservative, or fundamentalist Protestants. Politically conservative Protestants have consistently described themselves as highly religious, consistently report higher church attendance, and otherwise are considered more religious than adherents of “main-line” Protestant denominations. The active participation of some prominent evangelical Christian ministers into politics, notably Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and others, helped further this moment.

The rise of conservative Protestantism can in many ways be seen as a reaction to the social changes brought about the movements of the 1960s and the seeming decline of “traditional” values beginning in that era. Because conservative white Protestants are disproportionately centered in the South, reaction against the civil rights revolution was also a factor. The most important of the changes in American society that began in the 1960s, however, were the changing

gender roles and “sexual liberation” of women (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Repelled by these changes and other threats to so-called family values, many conservative Americans sought to defend a more stable commitment to “traditional family values”—especially for their children—and some turned to those churches that they saw as sharing this conservative vision.

But conversion has not been the primary factor driving the growth of conservative Protestantism. Greeley and Hout (2006) have shown that about 75 percent of the growth of conservative Protestantism in American society was due to their relatively high fertility rates, which was especially striking in contrast to the sharply declining fertility of mainline Protestants during the same period. A second major factor in conservative growth was an increase in the ability of conservative Christians to retain their young people. At one time, it was not uncommon for members of evangelical Christian denominations who prospered to switch to the more socially and financially prestigious mainline churches. With increasing affluence, that became less necessary, as more successful evangelicals made for more acceptable communities for the upwardly mobile. Still, the growth of evangelical Protestants has by no means been particularly large. Indeed, the most striking trend by far is the growth of seculars, especially among young people.

Although a great deal of attention has been paid to the political mobilization of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, looking back over the past 40 years it is clear that its impact has been modest at best. Conservative Protestants succeeded in putting a range of social issues on the political agenda for discussion, but in almost every case significant majorities of Americans did not support those positions. Whether we are talking about a return to traditional families with stay-at-home mothers, requiring prayers in public schools, banning abortion under all circumstances, or attitudes toward homosexuality, Americans have become increasingly liberal over time (Brooks 2000). The case of same-sex marriage is an especially interesting one to note. A few decades ago, the vast majority of Americans supported the view that marriage should be between a man and a woman, and in 1996 Congress passed, and President Bill Clinton signed into law, a measure known as the Defense of Marriage Act which allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriage licenses granted in another state and codified heterosexual unions as the only legal marriages under all federal laws. But over time, Americans have become increasingly supportive of same-sex marriage, and many states (19 at this writing, plus Washington, D.C.) have adopted such measures. If current trends continue, it is likely that more and more states will adopt these measures. As older people who are much more strongly opposed to same-sex marriage die out and are replaced by younger people (who are very supportive of same-sex marriage), strong political majorities in favor of same-sex unions will emerge.