Chapter Twelve

From Church Tradition to Consumer Choice:

The Gallup Surveys of the Unchurched American

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There are many reasons for expecting that church membership and attendance should have been on the upswing during the 1980s: the "revival" of the Religious Right; the conservative swing in the national mood; the baby boomers finally settling into traditional adult roles; and denominational preoccupation with evangelism and church renewal. In fact, an article by Herb Miller (1989), written for the National Evangelistic Association, lists thirty-four reasons for optimism concerning church trends. In the context of such optimism a comparison of the membership and worship attendance figures from the 1978 and 1988 Gallup surveys of the Unchurched American (Princeton Religion Research Center, 1978, 1988) appears rather enigmatic. While supporting at least some of the reasons given for optimism, the surveys nevertheless show *no* statistically significant change in either church membership or worship attendance over the ten-year period. In fact, as will be seen in Table 12.2, the comparative figures show, if anything, a slight decline; and in this regard the Unchurched American Surveys are consistent with other national surveys (Hout and Greeley, 1987; Chaves, 1989; Princeton Religion Research Center, 1990).

Given the general stability in religious participation found in national surveys over the last ten years, the purpose of this paper is to use the 1978 and 1988 Gallup Unchurched American Surveys to probe beneath the apparent surface calm for possible subterranean churning. Our informing question is whether the overall stability is the result of "nothing having changed," or the result of identifiable positive and negative changes that cancel each other out. In pursuing this question our analysis moves through four stages. First, we look for potential increases and decreases over time in characteristics traditionally related to membership and attendance. For example, if we find

that commitment to Christ (a traditionally positive correlate of participation) increased, but that confidence in organized religion decreased, the two changes could cancel each other out in terms of overall rates of membership and worship attendance.

Second, we look for possible positive and negative changes over time in membership and attendance within different subgroups of the population. For example, if we find that the religious participation of the baby boom generation increased over the last ten years, but that of the depression generation decreased, the positive and negative changes of the these two groups may cancel each other out in terms of the overall level of membership and worship attendance.

Third, we explore the extent to which the relationships may have changed over time in a multivariate model of membership and attendance. In a sense, this is a more powerful and nuanced means of pursuing the same kinds of questions addressed in phase one and two. It allows us to explore changes in the meanings of and motivations for religious membership and participation, even if the overall levels did not vary.

Roof and Hoge's (1980) study of the 1978 Unchurched American Survey provides a helpful point of departure for our multivariate analysis. Building on Hoge and Roozen's (1979) review of research on religious commitment, Roof and Hoge tested five theories of religious participation. The reader is referred to Hoge and Roozen, and Roof and Hoge for a comprehensive discussion of the theories. In brief they include:

1. ***Deprivation theory:*** As summarized by Roof and Hoge, "it is actually a group of related theories, all stating that persons suffering deprivation look to religion as a means of compensation" (1980:406). The theory has been used with both objective measures of deprivation such as socioeconomic status, and subjective indicators such as "satisfaction with life."
2. ***Child rearing theory:*** As its name suggests this theory proposes that parents become actively involved in the church for the sake of their children and the quality of family life.
3. ***Social learning theory:*** Roof and Hoge note that this theory can be applied at both the subcultural and individual level. At the subcultural level the theory argues that normative expectations for religious participation differ among different subcultures such as denominations and regions. Such a perspective has been used, for example, to account for religious participation being higher in the South than in the West, and being higher for Roman Catholics than for mainline Protestants. At the individual level, social learning theory proposes, in its most concrete application to religion, that the strength of church-related reli-

gious socialization during childhood is a major determinant of one's adult religious attitudes and behavior.

4. ***Localism theory:*** Most forcefully articulated by Roof (1978), it is a specific application of the sociological notion of "plausibility structures" (Berger, 1967). In Roof's view, because of the increased pluralism of cultures in contemporary society, the plausibility of church religion is increasingly restricted to those persons with a high investment in traditional, local community affairs, and those local social networks in which they are embedded.
5. ***Value structure theory:*** In its most general formulation this theory argues that there will be a congruence between the individual's religious beliefs and values, and other beliefs and values that the individual holds. Specifically in regard to social and religious changes in the United States since the 1930s, empirical applications of the theory consistently find traditional sexual and family values and traditional free-enterprise values to be associated positively with church participation, and "new morality" and civil libertarian values to be associated with marginal participation.

In applying these theories to the 1978 Unchurched American Survey data, Roof and Hoge found no support for the deprivation theory, minimal support for the child rearing and social learning theories,[1] and strongest support for the localism and value structure theories. They also found that most of the affect of age and education on religious participation is mediated through localism and value structures, and that their multivariate model had more explanatory power for liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics than it did for conservative Protestants.

The careful development of the 1978 Unchurched American Survey and insightful analysis of Roof and Hoge provide a solid grounding for comparative analysis. Unfortunately, the 1988 survey either omitted or radically changed several of Roof and Hoge's key variables so that an exact replication of their analysis was not possible. Consequently, our analysis uses a multivariate model constructed from variables available in both surveys, including several used by Roof and Hoge, and two new dimensions. Our model includes variables related to Roof and Hoge's child rearing, social learning, and value structure theories. Localism is not included because a comparative variable is not available across surveys.[2] Deprivation theory was not included because, like Roof and Hoge, we found minimal support for it in a preliminary analysis of the 1988 data.

Two dimensions not included in the Roof and Hoge analysis have received increasing attention in discussions of American denominational religion over the last ten years. They include:

1. ***Religious individualism:*** Although discussed in various ways in the literature, religious individualism has at least two major components. First, in the form of "Sheilaism" (Bellah et al., 1987), it is decidedly anti-institutional. Second, as a manifestation of the "new voluntarism," it reflects a growing consumer orientation in American religion (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Roof and McKinney, 1987).
2. ***Religious commitment, particularly spirituality:*** A common theme in the emerging literature on the religiosity of the baby boom generation is a distinction between personal spirituality and organized religion. The critical implication for our purposes is that many in this generation do not make a direct connection between their personal religiosity and their participation in religious institutions (Roozen, Carroll, and Roof, 1990).

Building on current theory, therefore, our multivariate analysis of the Unchurched American Surveys adds items that test various dimensions of commitment to religious institutions per se, in distinction from belief and devotional practices. Importantly, these additional variables provide new insights into the veracity of the popularly perceived, increasing consumerism of American religion.

We first apply our multivariate model of membership and attendance to our entire sample, and discuss the implications of this third stage of our overall analysis. We then move to the fourth and final stage of our analysis: the application of our model to examine the different patterns, and changes in patterns, of membership and attendance among conservative and liberal Protestants, and Roman Catholics.

Data and Measures

Our data are from the 1978 and 1988 Unchurched American Surveys conducted by the Gallup poll for ad hoc coalitions of religious instrumentalities. Full descriptions of the sample designs can be found in the survey reports (Princeton Religion Research Center, 1978, 1988). Each of the surveys contains the standard Gallup organization cross-sectional sample of the adult, noninstitutionalized population, eighteen years of age and over; and a variety of supplemental subsamples. Our analysis disregards each year's supplemental subsamples and uses only the standard Gallup poll cross-sectional sample.

Operational definitions of variables included in our analysis are listed in Table 12.1. Of particular note are three variables that measure church consumerism—a special case of religious individualism. The first variable in this category is a single item that measures whether or not church atten-

dance is optional for standing as a "good Christian." We label this item "church voluntarism." The second variable is a scale that measures the degree to which the church is perceived as warm, spiritual, and meaningful. This scale is labeled "church personalism." The third variable is the church organization scale. This scale measures the degree to which the church is perceived as too organized, too restrictive about morality, or not concerned enough about social justice issues.

In Support of Optimism

Table 12.2 shows the change (or lack thereof) from 1978 to 1988 in the percentage distributions of key variables in our analysis. At the top of the table the reader will note that both church membership and attendance remain virtually unchanged over the ten-year period. The remaining sixteen variables in the table are all "traditional" correlates of religious participation. Of these traditional correlates, half show no significant change from 1978 to 1988; the other half show significant changes.

Among the eight traditional correlates that changed over the ten-year period, five changed in a direction that should have a positive impact on membership and attendance. In 1988 there are higher levels of commitment to Christ, and "warm" perceptions of the church (church personalism scale[3]); there are lower levels of negative organizational perceptions of the church; there are lower levels of "new morality" values; and there is an aging population. In each of these cases, the movement from 1978 to 1988 is from categories of traditionally lower membership and attendance to categories of higher participation.

The 1978 to 1988 changes for prayer and region are neutrally mixed in regard to their possible effect on religious participation. For frequency of prayer, there is movement over time from both the high participation "daily prayer" category and the low participation "never pray" category to the middle range "less than daily" prayer category. Regional change is from areas of moderate participation—the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic—to both the high participation South and the low participation West. The change in education is dramatic, but education itself has a complex relationship to religious participation with little direct effect.

The Confounding of Optimism

Overall, the changes apparent in Table 12.2 support an optimistic view vis-à-vis church membership and attendance. Other things being equal, the changes should have been accompanied by increases in membership and attendance. Why weren't they? Table 12.3 provides an initial answer and moves us into the second phase of our analysis.

TABLE 12.1
Definitions of Variables and Scales

Member:
"Are you, yourself, a member of a church or synagogue?" Yes/No

Attendance:
"About how many times would you say you attended a church or synagogue in the *past six months*—would you say at least once a week, two or three times a month, or once a month or less?"

Denominational Family:
Followed coding used by Roof and Hoge (1980). "Liberal Protestant" (UCC, UMC, Episcopal, United Presbyterian, LCA, Disciples, American Baptist); "Conservative Protestant:" (Southern Baptist, Latter-Day Saints, Other Baptists, Baptists—Don't Know, Missouri Synod Lutheran); "Roman Catholic"; and "Other."

Belief Scale: (1978 alpha: .45; 1988 alpha: .50)
"What do you believe about Jesus Christ?" Plus, "Do you believe there is life after death?"

Commitment to Christ: (Single item)
"Would you say that you have made a commitment to Jesus Christ, or not?"

Religious Experience: (Single item)
"Have you ever had a religious experience—that is, a particularly powerful religious insight or awakening?"

Church Personalism Scale: (1978 alpha: .66; 1988 alpha: .68)
Three likert items: most churches and synagogues (1) are warm and accepting of outsiders; (2) have a clear sense of the real spiritual nature of religion; (3) are effective in helping people find meaning in life. (Note: the 1978 items were asked in a negative direction, and are reversed in our scale to make them comparable to the positive direction of the 1988 items.)

Church Organization Scale: (1978 alpha: .54; 1988 alpha: .42)
Three likert items: most churches and synagogues (1) are too concerned with organizational, as opposed to theological or spiritual, issues; (2) are not concerned enough with social justice; and (3) are too restrictive in the rules preached about morality.

Church Voluntarism: (Single item)
"Do you think a person can be a good Christian or Jew if he or she doesn't attend church or synagogue?" Yes/No

Traditional Values Scale: (1978 alpha: .46; 1988 alpha: .50)
Two likert items: Would you welcome or not welcome (1) more emphasis on traditional family ties; (2) more respect for authority.

New Morality Scale: (1978 alpha: .58; 1988 alpha: .47)
Two likert items: Would you welcome or not welcome (1) more acceptance of sexual freedom; (2) more acceptance of marijuana usage.

Religious Socialization: (1978 alpha: .62; 1988 alpha: .68)
Four items: importance of religion when growing up; Sunday school or church attendance when in grade school; religious training as a child; and confirmation training during one's youth.

TABLE 12.2
1978–1988 Change in Marginal Percentage Distributions

	1978	1988	NS
Church Member	66.7%	65.8%	NS
Church Attendance			
Once a week or more	34.7	33.9	
2–3 times a month	14.7	15.2	
Once a month or less	14.8	16.8	
None in the last 6 months	35.9	34.1	NS
Denominational Family	Not Sig.		
Belief Scale	Not Sig.		
Religious Experience	Not Sig.		
Frequency of Prayer			
Daily	57.2	51.9	
Less than daily	29.5	37.2	
Never	13.0	10.9	
Commitment to Christ			
Yes	61.1	67.5	
Don't know	6.2	5.7	
No	32.8	26.9	
Church Personalism Scale			
Low	47.4	21.0	
Moderate	30.8	36.9	
High	21.8	42.1	
Church Organization Scale			
High	44.8	32.2	
Moderate	38.3	47.6	
Low	16.9	20.1	
Church Voluntarism	Not Sig.		
Traditional Values Scale	Not Sig.		
New Morality Scale			
High	12.0	4.4	
Moderate	24.0	20.9	
Low	64.0	74.6	
Religious Socialization Scale	Not Sig.		
Sex	Not Sig.		
Age			
21 and under	8.6	5.4	
22–32	26.9	21.8	
33–42	18.1	20.7	
43–52	14.7	14.4	
53 +	31.6	37.8	
Education			
Less than high school graduate	31.0	20.3	
High school or some college	56.1	56.9	
College graduate	13.0	22.8	
Region			
Northeast and Mid-Atlantic	27.8	23.2	
South, Midwest, Mountain	60.0	62.0	
West	12.0	14.8	
Family Cycle	Not Sig.		

Table 12.3 shows the percentage of church members and the percentage of regular church attenders for both 1978 and 1988 within categories of our traditionally hypothesized correlates of religious participation. The "church personalism scale" section of the table provides a clear example of why what should have been a positive demographic change for levels of religious participation did not result in an overall increase in participation. Table 12.2 showed a significant increase from 1978 to 1988 in the proportion of the population who had positive perceptions of church personalism.

Table 12.3 shows that in both 1978 and 1988 such positive perceptions and membership are positively related—i.e., the "warmer" one's perceptions of the church the more likely one is to be a church member. However, Table 12.3 also shows that membership rates for the high personalism category in 1988 are not as high as they were in 1978. In fact, there is a decline in church membership from 1978 to 1988 within each category of church personalism. There are more people in 1988 with a positive image of the church, but such people are less likely to be members in 1988 than in 1978. The net result is that the two changes cancel each other out. The same dynamic can be seen for the new morality and the commitment to Christ sections in Table 12.3.

A more complex set of dynamics is at work in the age/cohort section of Table 12.3, but with the same overall effect. There is some of the above dynamic—i.e., an increase over time in the proportion of the population over fifty-five years old, but a decrease over time in the participation of this age group. Additionally, there is a mix of some cohorts and age groups that increased their participation and some that decreased. For example, the religious participation of the twenty-one and under age group increased over time, but the participation of the forty-three to fifty-two age group decreased; and, the religious participation of the cohort born between 1946 and 1956 (this cohort was twenty-two to thirty-two years old in 1978 and thirty-three to forty-two in 1988) increased over the ten-year period, but the participation of the cohort born between 1926 and 1935 decreased.

Overall, Table 12.3 shows that more subcategories of our traditional correlates declined in participation than increased, thus neutralizing the positive demographic changes noted in Table 12.2.

We began our analysis with the question: Is the overall stability in church membership and attendance during the 1980s the result of "nothing having changed," or the result of identifiable positive and negative changes that cancel each other out? It is clear from Tables 12.2 and 12.3 that it is the latter. Additionally, Table 12.2 suggests that a significant

portion of the subterranean churning has to do with why a person chooses to get involved in the life of a religious institution. We now turn to the third stage of our analysis—a more in-depth exploration of the changes from 1978 to 1988 in the meanings of and motivation for church participation.

TABLE 12.3
1978–1988 Membership and Attendance Change Within Categories of Independent Variables*

	1978–1988 Change in % Church Member		1978–1988 Change in % Attending Twice a Month or More	
	1978	1988	1978	1988
Frequency of Prayer	Not Sig.**		Not Sig.**	
Commitment to Christ				
Yes	81.5	80.5		
Don't know	50.0	43.5	Not Sig.**	
No	42.2	33.7		
Church Personalism Scale				
Low	57.9	53.2		
Moderate	66.5	59.8	Not Sig.**	
High	85.8	77.2		
Church Organization Scale	Not Sig.**		Not Sig.**	
New Morality Scale				
High	37.9	35.1		
Moderate	57.0	54.8	Not Sig.**	
Low	75.7	70.6		
Age and Cohort***				
21 and under	55.6	59.3	43.4	46.2
22–32	56.2	55.4	39.7	41.0
33–42	58.5	65.3	43.2	46.1
43–52	80.0	68.1	58.2	47.8
53 +	75.2	71.8	57.8	55.9
Education	Not Sig.**		Not Sig.**	
Region	Not Sig.**		Not Sig.**	

* Only variables showing significant marginal changes in Table 12.2 are included.
** Not significant at $p > .01$.
*** A ╲ connects a cohort's 1978 membership and attendance with its 1988 membership and attendance.

The Changing Meaning of Religious Participation

The meanings of and motivations for religious participation are varied and complex. Therefore, analysis requires a relatively sophisticated statistical technique that simultaneously examines a variety of relationships (a model). We opted for a block-step multiple regression approach. Individual explanatory variables in our model are grouped into "blocks," and each block is entered into the regression analysis in successive "steps." The regression analysis shows the relative influence of the various blocks on religious participation for 1978 and 1988. Our major interest is a comparison of the influence of these blocks across the ten-year period. The variables and blocks in our model, and the order in which they were entered in our regression analysis are listed in Table 12.4.[4] Because of our interest in both membership and worship attendance, we first apply our explanatory model to membership, and then apply the same model to worship attendance, adding church membership as the first block-step in the analysis.[5]

TABLE 12.4
Step Descriptions

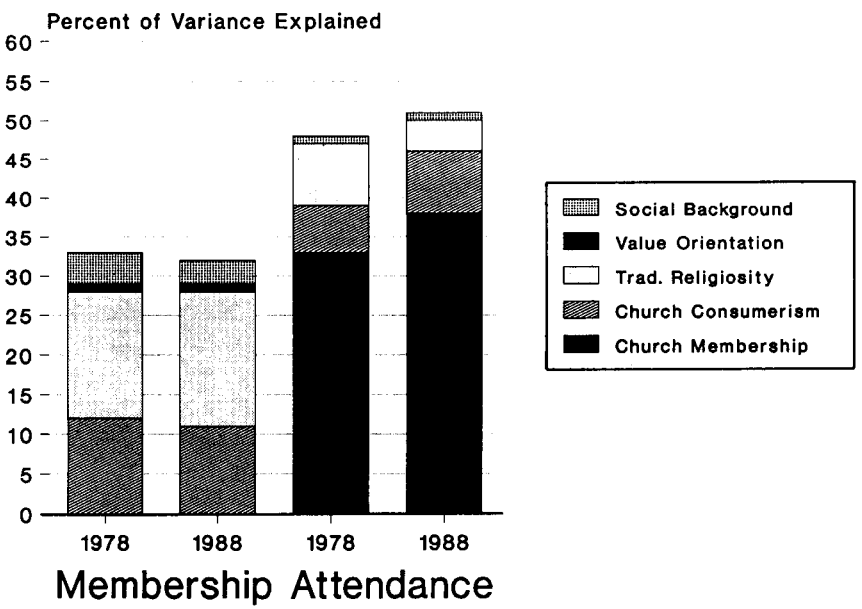
Step #	Describes	Items/Scales
1	CHURCH MEMBERSHIP	Church Member
2	CHURCH CONSUMERISM	Church Voluntarism Church Personalism Church Organization Scale
3	TRADITIONAL RELIGIOSITY	Commitment to Christ Frequency of Prayer Belief Scale Religious Experience
4	VALUE ORIENTATION	Traditional Values Scale New Morality Scale
5	SOCIAL BACKGROUND	Religious Socialization Scale Gender Age Education Region: Non-West, West Family Cycle: Married with kids, married without kids, and never married

We report the major findings of our analysis through a series of figures, graphically displaying the total explanatory power of our model (R^2 = percent of variance explained), and the incremental increase in explanatory power associated with the addition of each block-step (R^2 change). A more complete set of statistical results is contained in Tables A12.1 to A12.3 in the Appendix and A12.4 in the Supplemental Appendix.[6]

The Individual and Choice: Increasing Religious Consumerism

Figure 12.1 summarizes the results of the analysis for the total 1978 and 1988 samples. Beginning with membership, the figure shows little change from 1978 to 1988 in the meanings of and motivations for church membership. Traditional religiosity has the strongest effect in both years, followed by church consumerism. Beyond their strong influence, social background and general value orientations add little explanatory power.[7] But religious socialization (early contact with the church) by itself remains a strong predictor of membership.

FIGURE 12.1
What Affects Church Participation in America?
Step Summaries, 1978–1988



In essence, Americans join a church primarily because it "fits" their particular beliefs about Jesus, the Bible, life after death, and their accustomed devotional practice. Secondarily, Americans tend to choose and join a church they like—one that is warm, meaningful, and not too strict or organized. In fact, these reasons for joining have changed very little over the past decade. Such is not the case for worship attendance, however.

Figure 12.1 shows notable changes from 1978 to 1988 in the pattern of relationships for worship attendance. In 1978, church membership and traditional religiosity have the strongest influence on attendance, followed by church consumerism. In 1988, the importance of church membership for predicting attendance increases by 5 percentage points and church consumerism replaces traditional religiosity as the second most powerful explanatory block. Social background factors have little direct influence on church attendance in either 1978 or 1988, and general value orientations have no significant direct effect.[8]

Changes in the relationships of two individual variables in the church consumerism block are particularly interesting. The effects of church personalism and church voluntarism on worship attendance increase from 1978 to 1988 (see Table A12.1). But the increase in church voluntarism is especially dramatic. Indeed, the largest single change from 1978 to 1988 is the increasing influence on attendance of the conviction that it is necessary to attend church to be a good Christian or Jew.[9] This shift is important because the proportion of the American population feeling one way or another on this issue did not change (see Table 12.2). Nevertheless, the influence of church voluntarism on worship attendance did increase significantly. What does this mean? Simply, that those who believe church attendance is necessary to be a good Christian or Jew in 1988 are more likely to participate regularly than those who felt it was necessary in 1978. The trend is clear: Americans who attend church regularly in the late eighties do so because church attendance is a priority. They feel that churchgoing is an important—yes, even a necessary—thing to do. And when they do attend, they increasingly choose a "warm" and meaningful church.

To summarize, from 1978 to 1988 Americans who joined a church were primarily influenced by their religious beliefs and practice. Yet over that same period of time, motivations for church attendance shifted. The importance of church membership increased, and church consumerism replaced traditional religiosity as the strongest predictor of church attendance. The result? Americans who attended church regularly in the eighties did so because they felt that churchgoing is necessary to be a good Christian or Jew. Frequent attenders are also more likely to perceive the church as warm, spiritual, meaningful, and properly social-justice minded. Those who attend church less frequently are more likely to feel that it is *not* necessary to go to

church to be a good Christian or Jew. They also do not like a lot of specific things about the church—finding it cold and/or irrelevant.

The ascendance of church consumerism, then, cuts both ways. "Emancipation of the self"—as Roof and McKinney (1987) put it—is increasingly accompanied by anti-institutionalism for some. However, the obverse is also true: increased institutional commitment is markedly characteristic of the very active. Here we see the two faces of religious individualism. First, as a kind of self-emancipation, religious individualism loosens institutional moorings (Merelman, 1984:30ff.). The result is a religion functionally and spatially located in the self. Like Bellah et al.'s (1985) Sheila Larson, individuals are free to create their own religious faith (tenets and all) and consecrate their own personal "sacred space." In the radically individualist case, they themselves become their "temples." This kind of religious individualist neither wants nor feels the need for formal religious institutions. Religion is more than a "matter of personal choice"; as a self-created thing, it is the essence of a personal taste.

Second, it is clear that individualism also means something else. "Choice" includes both the choice to participate as well as the choice not to participate in the life of religious institutions. Our data suggest that the emancipation of the self works to "tighten up" or clarify commitments to institutions. It shows, for example, that worship attendance in the eighties was less a case of particular religious beliefs, parental legacy, or social habit than it was in the seventies. In a world of busy-ness and multiple organizational options, traditional reasons are less compelling. Church consumerism and personal satisfaction increasingly provide such reasons for making the "church choice."[10]

Significantly, the majority of Americans still choose church (66%—see Table 12.2). Still, the data indicate that denominational executives and local clergy can depend less on tradition and social convention to people the pews. Indeed, American church attendance is increasingly influenced by a concrete, local connection (church membership) and consumer satisfaction. Institutions exist primarily to serve the individual, and not vice versa. In this context, careful programming and local marketing become important. So while the incidence of religious participation has remained constant, the meaning of religious participation and implications for church response have changed.

Thus, it is curious that most discussions of the effects of increasing individualism or voluntarism focus on the negative implications for institutional life (e.g., Jacoby, 1975; Lasch, 1978; Robertson, 1980; Bellah et al., 1985; Roof and McKinney, 1987). Such discussions are frequently grounded in the kind of pro-institutional, social paradigm of American religion Herberg described

in his 1955 classic, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew.* From this perspective, individualism almost inevitably erodes participation in voluntary organizations. As individualism tightens its grip on American culture, the argument goes, the church will experience increasing decline. Eventually, the only people left in the church are those who resist the influence of American individualism and continue to operate out of a social locus of control. There is little evidence for this kind of conclusion, however.

Quite the opposite: recent research suggests that individualism is a culture-wide phenomenon that affects the way everyone interprets and re-interprets their daily lives—including the majority of those making the church choice. In *The Inner American,* Verof, Douvan, and Kulka (1981:529) examine the results of two national surveys of the American population's subjective mental health. The initial survey was conducted in 1957 and replicated in 1976. The most significant change, as described by the authors

> has been a shift from a socially integrated paradigm for structuring well-being, to a more personal or individuated paradigm for structuring well-being. We see the 1957 population taking much more comfort in culture and the 1976 population gathering much more strength in its personal adaptations to the world. We see this very general theme in a number of different ways . . . (1) the diminution of role standards as the basis for defining adjustment; (2) the increased focus on self-expressiveness and self-direction in social life; (3) a shift in concern from social organizational integration to interpersonal intimacy.

If Verhof and company are correct, then the basic change from a social to an individual locus of control in American culture began prior to the surveys of religious participation presented here. That being the case, what we are reading in the Unchurched American Surveys is how this individuated paradigm is permeating the way persons approach religious institutions. Consequently, an individualistic approach need not lead to decreased institutional commitment as much as a change in how that commitment is interpreted, and then, lived out—as, for example, through Yankelovich's "ethic of commitment" (1981:250ff.).

An increasing individual locus of control simply means that an individual gets "more picky" about what options he or she chooses out of the many. In the church choice, there are the options to participate or not to participate. And if persons choose to participate, there are additional choices about "how"—under what conditions—they will participate. Traditions of the past give way to concerns for self-expression ("I will decide to go, how often to go, or not to go at all based on my particular needs and interests") and interpersonal intimacy ("If I do choose a particular church, and go, I expect that it will provide meaningful experiences and warmth"). The increasing domi-

nance of religious consumerism, as a form of cultural individualism, is the most important change in the religious marketplace of the late eighties.

Denominational Differences in the Meaning of Church Participation

Cultural individualism as church consumerism is a pervasive force in the religious marketplace of the late 1980s. Next we consider its interaction with another distinguishing feature of American religion—denominational pluralism. Specifically, we turn to an examination of the changing meaning of church participation within liberal and conservative Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. As before, changes in the meanings of and motivations for church membership and worship attendance are analyzed using the block-step regression model outlined in Table 12.4. Results are graphically presented in the text (Figures 12.2–12.4) with more detailed tables included in the Appendix (Tables A12.2–A12.3).

Not surprisingly, our analysis shows that the "church choice" is negotiated in different ways by each of the three denominational groups. In summary, conservative Protestants are increasingly committed to "my church"; liberal Protestants hold allegiance to "what church?"; and Roman Catholics continue to choose "THE church."

The Conservative Protestant Choice: "My Church." Conservative Protestants are very clear about what church they belong to and attend. It is "my church," and for membership among conservative Protestants traditional belief and religious socialization became increasingly important during the 1980s. As shown in Figure 12.2, the most powerful effects on church membership among conservative Protestants in 1988 are traditional orthodoxy (explaining 14% of the variation), church consumerism (9%), and social background characteristics (4%). Within these blocks, single variables with the strongest effects in 1988 include: church voluntarism, commitment to Christ, religious belief, and religious socialization (see Appendix, Table A12.2). From 1978 to 1988, the incremental effect of traditional religiosity on membership increased 4% and social background factors gained slightly (1%).

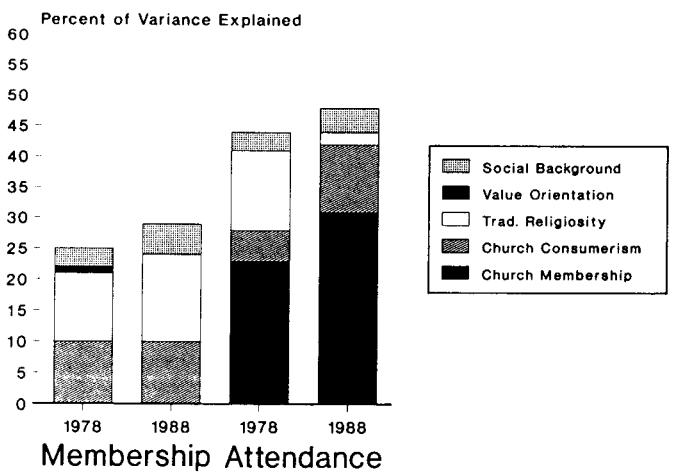
Conservative Protestant membership is increasingly characterized by a set of inherited, biblically focused beliefs. One might argue, as Ammerman (1990) does, that a population shift from the Frostbelt to the Sunbelt has forced large numbers of southern conservatives to define themselves more sharply against "foreign" religious and cultural influx. This "circle the wagons" mentality is reinforced by: (1) a high level of orthodox dogmatism among conservative Protestants—particularly evangelicals (Jelen, 1990; Jelen and Wilcox, 1991); and (2) a longtime investment in the religious education of

adults and children that emphasizes biblical knowledge and traditional evangelical beliefs more than civic or moral education (Benson and Eklin, 1990).

In general, conservative Protestants differentiate themselves from liberal Protestants on doctrinal grounds (Balmer, 1989; Hunter, 1983).[11] Thus, membership—while still influenced by loyalty to a particular conservative Protestant denomination or church—is increasingly typified by allegiance to the generic category of "evangelicals" (Marsden, 1987). In fact, Hadaway and Marler (1993) show that "bred and raised" religious conservatives are much more likely to remain within the broader conservative Protestant camp than liberal Protestants are to stay in the broader liberal Protestant camp. In the late eighties, "my church" is a church that upholds evangelical beliefs.

What membership means for conservative Protestants is especially important because membership is highly predictive of church attendance, and increasingly so. Figure 12.2 shows that from 1978 to 1988, church membership's effect on church attendance among conservative Protestants rose from 23% to 31% (explained variance). The figure also shows that the effect of church consumerism on attendance increased by 6%, and social background factors by 2%. Strikingly, the effect of traditional religiosity on worship attendance decreased 11% between 1978 and 1988. Membership and church consumerism, together, explain 42% of the variance in church attendance in the late eighties (compared to only 28% in 1978).

FIGURE 12.2
What Affects Church Participation Among Conservatives? Step Summaries, 1978–1988



Belonging to a church that holds traditional evangelical beliefs is still important for attendance. But what increasingly determines the level of active involvement for conservative Protestants (over and above belonging) is church consumerism. Conservative Protestants choose a church, join it, and go frequently because they like it. They perceive their church as warm, meaningful, and not too strict or too organized (for examples, see Ammerman, 1987:59 and Marsden, 1991:81). Conversely, conservative Protestants who belong but do not attend regularly are dissatisfied with their church—not so much because it is not conservative enough, but because it does not meet their personal needs for warmth, meaning, and "spirituality," or it is perceived as "too strict" or "too organized."

The Liberal Protestant Choice: "What Church?" Liberal Protestants negotiate the church choice very differently from their conservative Protestant counterparts. These differences became increasingly stark from 1978 to 1988, especially in regard to the general significance of church membership. Figure 12.2 shows that during the 1980s the influence of both traditional religiosity and social background factors on church membership increased for conservative Protestants, as did the overall explanatory power of our membership model. Figure 12.3 shows that the exact opposite is true for liberal Protestants. For liberal Protestants traditional religiosity and social background factors have less influence on church membership in 1988 than in 1978, and the overall explanatory power of our membership model decreases (explaining 31% of variance in 1978, but only 26% in 1988). Perhaps not coincidentally, liberal Protestant denominations have lower rates of membership retention and growth (Marler and Hadaway, 1993; Hadaway and Marler, 1993).

Not only does Figure 12.3 show that the predictability of church membership declined from 1978 to 1988, it also shows that membership's influence on worship attendance declined across the ten-year period (from an incremental effect of 23% to 18%). Whether liberal Protestants are members or not has much less impact on frequency of attendance than it used to. Overall, membership is a factor of diminishing importance.

The declining significance of membership among liberal Protestants may be partially explained by less effective Christian education. For example, in a study of six American Protestant denominations, Search Institute found that mainline bodies exhibited low rates of church school attendance, high rates of dissatisfaction with present Christian education efforts, and low scores on "denominational loyalty." Of particular concern were very low scores on faith maturity among liberal Protestant youth (Benson and Eklin, 1990).[11]

But even more generally, the diminishing significance of membership among liberal Protestants and the declining effectiveness of Christian educa-

tion appear to be part of a broader erosion of all the traditional, institutional purveyors of liberal Protestant culture. As Carroll and Roof (forthcoming) note in their conclusion to a collection of twenty essays on the subject:

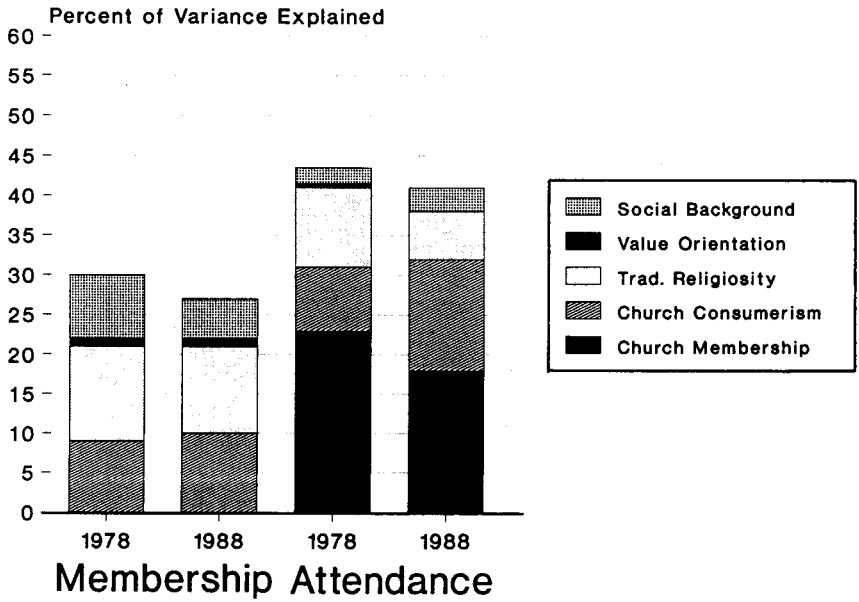
> Mainline Protestantism has moved "beyond establishment" in the sense of an unofficial hegemony which mainline Protestants exercised at the cultural and social level in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. The combined impact of pluralism and privatization in matters of religion and culture has eroded much of this hegemony. This erosion, together with the serious hemorrhaging at the level of membership, has left mainline Protestants with a severe crisis of identity and purpose.
>
> We know that mainline Protestant denominations are in serious trouble. Here we are not speaking only of membership decline. Many of the cultures of particular denominations are out of touch with the changed realities that the church confronts in late twentieth-century America. Many of the plausibility structures on which the churches have relied to transmit and sustain cultures are no longer effective.

The emerging consensus in the late 1980s is that liberal Protestants go less to church school, know less about their denominational traditions and beliefs, and are less loyal to their denominations (Roof and McKinney, 1987:85ff.).

Liberal Protestants embody a consumer orientation toward religion to a much greater extent than either conservative Protestants or Roman Catholics. This is especially evident in the worship attendance model in Figure 12.3. It shows a significant decline from 1978 to 1988 in the effect of traditional religiosity on attendance (from 10% to 4%). And it shows an equally significant increase in the effect of church consumerism on attendance—almost doubling from 8% to 14%. Indeed, in the 1988 analysis, each variable in the church consumerism block shows a strong direct effect on church attendance (see Appendix, Table A12.3). It is especially telling that the relationship of church voluntarism to worship attendance is stronger than any other single variable in the entire model, including church membership.

The religious marketplace for liberal Protestants is wide open today. Less motivated by denominational or theological loyalty in the church choice, liberal Protestants attend church because it is warm, provides personalized meaning, has a clearly "spiritual" focus, is not "too organized," is not "too restrictive," and has just enough—but not too much—social justice emphasis. Like conservative Protestants, active liberal Protestants demonstrate commitment to the institutional church as an avenue for expressing and cultivating personal religiosity. But unlike conservative Protestants, the influence of church consumerism among liberal Protestants is increasingly unconstrained by traditional religious beliefs and practices or by social background factors.

FIGURE 12.3
What Affects Church Participation Among Liberals?
Step Summaries, 1978–1988

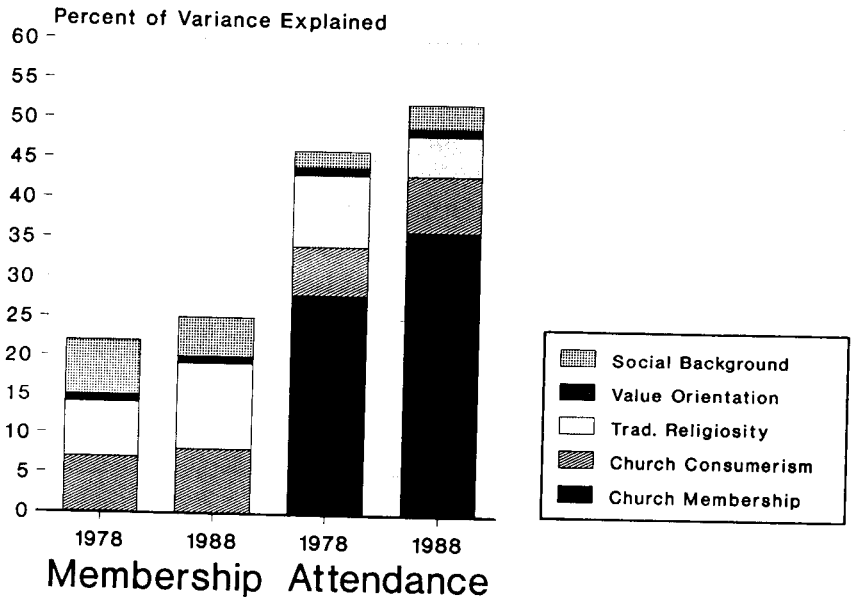


The pivotal question for active liberal Protestants is not whether church is important—but "what church?" This consumer-oriented pattern of choosing is reinforced in various ways. It may be encouraged by liberal Protestant denominations that place fewer demands for joining on persons who attend but are not "official" members (Stone, 1990). Or, in an opposite way, freedom from the ties of denominational loyalty may be reinforced by less convincing reasons (and less compelling demands) to stay in the liberal Protestant family. Indeed, Hadaway and Marler (1991) have found that barely half of those who are raised in liberal Protestant denominations remain "in the fold" through adulthood.

The Catholic Choice: "THE (Vatican II) Church." Roman Catholics present yet another picture. As shown in Figure 12.4, from 1978 to 1988 Roman Catholic membership is increasingly influenced by traditional religiosity (up 3% in variance explained) followed closely by church consumerism (up 2%). In both these respects, Roman Catholic changes are similar to those for conservative Protestants. Considering changes in individual variables over time,

however, there are notable differences between Roman Catholics and conservative Protestants (see Appendix, Table A12.2, and Supplemental Appendix, A12.4). In the traditional religiosity block, the effect of commitment to Christ on membership increases from 1978 to 1988 for both denominational groups. For Roman Catholics this is combined with an increase in the effect of prayer, while for conservative Protestants it is combined with a surge in the effect of belief. In the church consumerism block, the major factor responsible for its increased overall effect on conservative Protestant membership is church voluntarism, while for Roman Catholics it is satisfaction with the organizational side of the church—feeling that the church is neither too organized nor too strict, with just enough social justice emphasis.

FIGURE 12.4
What Affects Church Participation Among Catholics?
Step Summaries, 1978–1988



Such findings are consistent with recent programmatic changes as well as continuing institutional tensions within post-Vatican II Catholicism. The increasing relationship between traditional religiosity and Catholic membership, for example, may be a consequence of the adult catechists and religious education movement of Vatican II (Raferty and Leege, 1989). More particu-

larly, the strong effects of commitment to Christ and prayer are corroborated by the findings of Searle and Leege (1985). Their research shows, for example, an increasing incidence of "prayers to the Godhead exclusively" among Roman Catholics under forty. Gremillion and Leege (1989) conclude that this is directly related to the "Christocentric reemphasis" of Vatican II.

But Vatican II has also left a wake of unresolved tensions. As D'Antonio et al. observe, "Before Vatican II, the Church appeared to many as a monolith in its religious beliefs and practices" (1989:13). In fact, they argue that "democratization" has permeated the church since Vatican II resulting in tensions "between the newer pluralistic tendencies and the traditional, hierarchical, authoritarian structure" (1989:14). It is not surprising, then, to discover that concerns about organizational issues increasingly define Roman Catholic membership.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature in the Roman Catholic negotiation of the church choice appears in regard to worship attendance. Most visible is the increasing importance of membership for attendance. For Roman Catholics, even more so than for conservative Protestants—and in both cases in clear contrast to liberal Protestants—membership and attendance go hand in hand. And as already noted in the Roman Catholic and conservative Protestant cases, membership is increasingly defined by a specific set of beliefs and practices. Both traditions teach, and individuals within both traditions accept, that "my church" or "THE church" represents the "right" choice—whether on biblical or traditional grounds. As a result of historically important concerns about ecumenism and inclusivity, liberal Protestants are less dogmatic about the church choice; thus, individualism, personalism, and local organizational factors weigh more heavily than membership for attendance.

Nevertheless, the increasing influence of church consumerism on participation is also evident in Figure 12.4 for Roman Catholics. Its effects are even more vivid in the detail of Table A12.4 (Supplemental Appendix). Although no single institutional variable in 1978 had a significant direct effect on church attendance, all items and scales in the church consumerism block have significant effects in 1988. Additionally, whereas satisfaction with the organizational side of the church characterizes membership among Roman Catholics, the adjudged warmth or personalism of a parish is the most critical for attendance.

In sum, active Roman Catholics are members who believe that it is necessary to go to "THE" church to be a good Christian, and who feel that the parish they attend is warm and meaningful with a clear spiritual focus. Roman Catholic religious participation in the late 1980s, therefore, exhibits an interesting blend of loyalty to the tradition, and a filtering of this tradition through individual choice.

Cautious Optimism: The Individual Prevails

The subterranean churning beneath the surface calm of national church membership and attendance trends presents the proverbial dilemma of how to interpret half a glass of water. The glass can be seen as half-full, and such optimistic assessments are supported by concrete evidence of vitality. During the 1980s:

- Commitment to Christ and perceptions of the church as warmly personal increased.
- The percentage of adults never praying and negative perceptions of the church's organizational structure declined.
- Church membership and worship attendance increased for the baby boom generation.
- The South continued to grow at a disproportionate rate; there was a decrease in counter-cultural values; and large segments of the population moved into both the family formation and the post-retirement phases of the life cycle—all of which, traditionally, have been associated with high levels of religious participation.
- Increasing cultural individualism did not result in a decrease in overall levels in church membership or worship attendance.

Such signs should be received as encouraging. At the very least, they point to strengths upon which to build. Still, an overly optimistic assessment can act as an anesthetic, muting awareness of painful changes as they occur and delaying necessary attention to the changes until it is too late.

Our analysis also provides objective grist for pessimists who prefer to see the glass as half-empty. During the 1980s:

- The percentage of Americans praying daily declined.
- Church membership and worship attendance decreased among those over fifty-five years old.
- Worship attendance became less dependent upon denominational loyalty and personal religiosity, and more dependent upon church consumerism.
- The population of the West—a region with traditionally low levels of church involvement—continued to grow disproportionately.

Pessimism, like optimism, can have positive and negative effects. On the negative side, the pessimist often gives up, dismissing the possibility of building on current strengths and circling the wagons to take a final, and inevitably diminishing, stand. On the positive side, a pessimist's caution often leads to a deeper probing of the situation.

Indeed, probing beneath the apparent surface calm of American religious life led us to a deeper and more foundational issue. Our analyses show that the increasing dominance of religious consumerism, as a form of cultural individualism, is the most important change in the American religious marketplace of the late 1980s. The finding is important because it represents a paradigm shift away from traditional social-scientific assumptions of a social locus of control and typical theological idealizations of religion as "total commitment." At a fundamental level, it represents a change in the way Americans relate to religious institutions.

There are many social analysts and religious leaders who view cultural individualism as indicative of a church glass half-full, and rapidly emptying. Do not count us among them. The data do not warrant it. Church consumerism is not necessarily corrosive of institutional involvement. There are two faces to choice: choice implies an option, not a predetermined choice. Americans can choose to participate or not to participate in the life of religious institutions. And during the 1980s, Americans continued to choose church. The reasons for the church choice, however, did change. Americans attend regularly because they feel that churchgoing is necessary to be a good Christian or Jew and because they happen to like the church they frequent. Increasingly, positive institutional qualities like warmth and a spiritual focus draw Americans to church.

Nevertheless, we do believe that the increasing influence of individualism presents a significant challenge for America's religious institutions. The challenge has at least two dimensions. First, and perhaps most obvious, the increasing dominance of cultural individualism tilts the balance of power in the negotiation of the church choice in the direction of the individual. This is not so much because there are more church options; current generations of Americans have always lived within easy commuting distance of many and varied local churches. And it is not due solely to the influence of church voluntarism. Rather, the data suggest that the balance of power in making the church choice "tips" toward the individual because within a longstanding context of multiple church options and against the backdrop of growing conviction about church voluntarism, Americans are increasingly acting on the options as choices. They are more conscious of their institutional commitments; more reflective about the reasons for investing their commitments in any particular institution; and more concerned that the church of choice is responsive to their personal commitments. Individual tastes and priorities take precedence over institutional loyalty.

The second, and closely related, dimension of challenge in the contemporary negotiation of the church choice is that an increasing emphasis on reflective commitment and personal satisfaction tilts the balance of power in

the direction of the immediate and the concrete. In the competition between abstract dogma and concrete embodiment, the subjective-expressive possibilities of the latter are clearly most compelling. In the struggle between past loyalties and present needs or wants, feeling takes precedence over memory. What increasingly counts is the immediate relevancy of more traditional church norms and forms to my personal situation, my personal interests.

The strategic response to church consumerism is specialized and personalized programming. In the church choice, program is product. As such, church programming itself must diversify to fit the interests and needs of a variety of consumer groups or market niches. After all, it is product that delivers value to an increasingly discriminating consumer.

The American religious situation is becoming a more consumer-oriented marketplace. Some have even argued that the individualistic underpinning of the consumer orientation is a functional necessity in a modern society of diverse life-styles and segmented life worlds (e.g., Walrath, 1987). Nevertheless, there is really no such thing as a "pure" individualist. Identifiable and quite formidable social constraints still exist—particularly in the religious sector. Despite the fact that church consumerism is increasingly influential for predicting who goes to church, traditional religiosity and religious socialization remain strong predictors of who joins. Americans who hold traditionally orthodox beliefs and who were raised in the church are still more likely to join. Although, at least for liberal Protestants, such subcultural pressures have become significantly less important for both joining and attending.

The formative effect of subcultures is critical to understanding the differences found in our analysis among liberal Protestants, conservative Protestants, and Roman Catholics. The latter two maintain strong subcultures. Relatively clear, traditional stances on religious belief and practice, as well as religious socialization are key ingredients in the maintenance of both subcultures. Conservative Protestant and Roman Catholic subcultures both contain and sustain a predisposition toward church membership as an adult. Membership in either "my" church or "THE" church is an important component of individual biography. That does not mean, however, that church consumerism has no effect. For persons embedded in either subculture, individual tastes (or choice) and the quality of the local church product (or program) increasingly determine how active a member they will be.

In stark contrast, the strength of the liberal Protestant subculture has seriously eroded. As a consequence, the influence of all traditional correlates of membership and participation have declined. At the same time, the influence of consumerist impulses increased. The combined effect is that the

responsiveness (or nonresponsiveness) of local churches becomes an issue of critical importance. For liberal Protestants, church consumerism is increasingly predictive of both membership and activity. In this sense, liberal Protestantism represents the purest stream of consumerism within American denominationalism.

What is the likely effect of these changes for the future of denominational growth? Other things remaining equal (e.g., rates of new church development, or dramatic swings in birthrates), future national membership trends for conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics will be largely dependent upon subcultural strength. At the same time, future attendance trends for conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics will be dependent upon the ability of local congregations and parishes to respond to the immediate needs and wants of their members. To the extent that they are able to embody their traditions and practices in user-friendly ways, conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics can count on an active (and increasingly cohesive) membership. In contrast, both future national membership and attendance trends for liberal Protestants will be largely dependent upon the ability of local congregations to fend for themselves in the absence of strong subcultural norms.