Chapter Fourteen

Baby Boomers and the Return to the Churches

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"With babes in arms and doubts in mind, a generation looks to religion," is the caption of a *Newsweek* cover story (December 17, 1990) on young Americans returning to God. The post-war "baby boom" generation, having transformed American society in so many ways, is now reshaping the religious landscape. Youth born between the years 1946 and 1964—perhaps better thought of as two cohorts, the older and younger boomers—are at an influential age. The older boomers are now in their mid-forties, the younger ones are in their thirties. All together, 75 million strong—roughly one-third of the American population—they are what sociologists call the "lead cohort" of contemporary society, setting trends that include moral values, political attitudes, family life, career patterns, and religious life.

Because of their sheer size—the largest cohort of youth ever in our nation's history—baby boomers have impacted religious institutions since the time they were children. In the 1950s, the swelling numbers of school-age children combined with economic prosperity led to the suburban expansion of churches and synagogues. Religious membership increased as parents sought religious instruction for their children. "A Little Child Shall Lead Them," argued Dennison Nash (1968) at the time, suggesting that the very presence of so many children helped to account for the so-called religious revival of the 1950s. Symbolism of religion, family, and country was pervasive, buttressed no doubt by rising affluence and the cold-war ideology of the times.

Then, beginning in the mid-1960s, when large numbers of this generation were spread between their adolescence and early twenties, they greatly altered the cultural climate of the country. Trauma surrounding the civil rights movement and later the Vietnam War, and the changing moral, sexual, and familial values of the counter-cultural years, all combined to produce a youthful defection from the religious establishment. Cults and new religious movements of all kinds flourished, as did more secular human potential movements and "alternative life-styles." Trends persisted into the 1970s, although social activism dissipated and the counter-cultural values of the "new morality"

became an individualistic "drop out and turn on" regression to drugs, sex, and self. And throughout this period, many youth did just that—drop out of religious institutions. Just as in earlier times they swelled the membership rolls of mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations, now they left in record numbers, adding to the malaise that had set in upon these institutions.

And now, once again, we are at a critical phase in the life of this generation—-the time of their "second coming," as Annie Gottlieb (1987) puts it. Many boomers are approaching mid-life and the kinds of assessment that often accompany that phase of life. To the extent that there is a dominant direction to changes within the post-war generation in the 1990s, it is into family formation and parenting, mid-life career concerns, and some re-examination of value commitments, the latter often in a more conservative direction. According to the *Rolling Stone* Survey (see Sheff, 1988), many in this generation who once endorsed sexual freedom and altered consciousness now say "no" to their children with respect to casual sex and drugs.

With respect to boomers and religion, there is considerable speculation today—far more speculation than actual research. Conflicting views are found in the statements by religious leaders and in the media and popular writings. Three views, or some version of them, often get stated:

1. ***Return to Religion.*** It is said that boomers are returning to organized religion after a lengthy absence. Media reports of a return to greater religious involvement became commonplace in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The return is presumed to be in the conservative direction, that is, to evangelical and fundamentalist congregations. Religious return accompanies a "conservative drift" in social and political attitudes, and family formation and parenting patterns.
2. ***Secular Generation.*** Diametrically opposite, this view suggests that baby boomers are perhaps the most secular, most materialistic of generations yet. Many of the stereotypes and caricatures of the baby boom generation encourage such thinking: labels like Yuppies and Dinks, and descriptive terms such as narcissistic and self-serving. The truth is only a small proportion of baby boomers fit the Yuppie and Dinks descriptions, but they have a disproportionate influence in shaping public opinion.
3. ***Privately Religious, but not Institutionally Involved.*** A third view seeks to reconcile the two above by implying that baby boomers are religious—perhaps, very religious—but they don't express it in traditionally institutional religious ways. Their religion is privatized, invisible, deeply personal and spiritual. One thinks of Jack Simms' consulting service in California that goes by the name of B.O.O.M.E.R.S.,

Inc., i.e., Believers Outside of Most Every Religious System. Boomers are religious and spiritual but not in ways that you might easily identify.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine current boomer trends in religion, and to try to sort out the validity of these possible explanations. We are concerned primarily with the trends as they relate to organized religion. Accordingly, we look at four topics pertinent to church life in the 1990s: (1) Is there a return to the churches? (2) Who are the returnees? (3) What kind of return is it? and (4) Will the return make any difference for patterns of church growth and decline in the decade ahead?

Is There a Return?

The NORC General Social Survey Series indicates—at least in the case of worship attendance—that there is a return. These surveys based on representative samples of the adult American population were conducted throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and are probably the most reliable source of trend data on the American population. Questions on religion, especially beliefs and attitudes, are limited but worship attendance is included in all the surveys.

Roozen, McKinney, and Thompson (1990), for example, using the General Social Survey series for the early 1970s and the early 1980s, document an increase from 33.5% to 42.8% in regular worship attendance for persons born between 1945 and 1954 (the older boomers). They speak of the "Big Chill" generation warming to worship, suggesting that the number of older boomers regularly involved in the worship life of their religious communities has increased by 3 to 4 million.

In a follow-up analysis, Roof and Roozen (1989) reexamined the NORC data adding a third time period. Specifically the pooled NORC samples used in their analysis covered: the "early seventies" (1972, 1973), the "early eighties" (1982, 1983), and the "late eighties" (1987, 1988). Similarly, the baby boomer population was split into two waves, the "older baby boom," born from 1945 to 1954, and the "younger baby boom," born from 1955 to 1965. There are both substantive and practical reasons for this split. Aside from obvious life-cycle differences, older boomers came of age during the sixties and hold values that still set them apart from those growing up in the more sedate seventies. And practically, there were too few cases of younger boomers in the 1972–73 sample, thus forcing us to pay attention primarily to the older half of the generation.

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 14.1. Several observations can be drawn. First, worship attendance increased from the early 1970s to

the early 1980s, and remained at elevated levels for older boomers throughout the 1980s. Data for the two time periods in the 1980s thus add support to the thesis of a return to organized religion. Second, among younger boomers, there was an increase in religious attendance from 1982–83 to 1987–88, especially a shift from low to moderate involvement. This pattern adds further support to the "return to religion" argument.

TABLE 14.1
Worship Attendance for Older and Younger Baby Boom Cohorts in 1972–1973, 1982–1983, and 1987–1988

	1972–73	1982–83	1987–88
Older Cohort*			
Worship Attendance			
Low	39.6%	37.0%	35.9%
Moderate	26.9	20.2	23.3
High	33.5	42.8	40.8
N =	(1015)	(1124)	(721)
Younger Cohort**			
Worship Attendance			
Low	—	41.5	35.6
Moderate	—	22.8	27.9
High	—	35.6	36.5
N =		(1151)	(825)

*Born 1945–1954
**Born 1955–1965

Another study inquiring into boomers is the Lilly Endowment-funded survey of 1,579 baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1962, carried out in 1988 and 1989 in four states—California, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Ohio. In this study, for which we were principal investigators, 96% of all boomers identified a religious tradition in which they were raised. Almost 90% said they had attended Sunday school, or had some type of religious training as a child. We were interested in knowing what had happened to them since childhood. How many remained in the faiths in which they grew up, or had switched to other faiths or simply dropped out? If they had dropped out, how many had returned to active religious involvement later in their lives?

A partial answer is found in Table 14.2. It shows the traditions in which the respondents were raised and their current religious preferences. Americans

tend to have high levels of religious switching between denominations and even denominational families, and it was expected that boomers would have equally high, if not higher, switching levels. It was also expected that switching would be greater for mainline Protestants than conservative Protestants, in keeping with all that is known about the Protestant establishment's malaise and weaker claims upon the individual's commitment (Hoge and Roozen, 1979; Roof and McKinney, 1987). The findings as shown here are consistent with this prediction: only 65% of the boomers raised in mainline Protestantism today claim a similar affiliation; 83% of conservative Protestants remain in the same affiliation.[1] Of those reared in the Protestant mainline, 15% are now conservative, whereas, the conservatives have lost only 4% to the mainliners. Of those raised as Protestant mainliners, 13% are now "Nones" (no religious affiliation) as compared to 9% of conservatives.

Worth noting are the horizontal rows in the table for the two large Protestant constituencies. Here it is apparent that conservative Protestants have picked up sizable numbers of boomers in the switching process from all religious groups but Jewish. For mainline Protestants, the numbers switching in are all considerably lower, except for Jews who do drift in their favor.

TABLE 14.2
Switching Patterns: Religion Reared and Current Religion

	Religion Raised					
Current Religion	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other	None
Mainline Protestant	65%	4%	2%	3%	2%	6%
Conservative Protestant	15	83	9	—	10	25
Catholic	6	2	76	—	—	6
Jewish	—	—	—	81	—	—
Other	2	3	1	3	70	—
None	13	9	12	14	17	64
Total %	101	101	100	101	99	101
N =	(369)	(460)	(542)	(36)	(41)	(52)

Of interest, Catholics fall midway between mainline and conservative Protestants in holding on to their own: 76% reared Catholic still identify as Catholic. Those who leave Catholicism tend to go either to the "Nones" or to the conserv-

ative wing of Protestantism. Jewish boomers who have switched have largely disaffiliated from religion. Those reared in nonaffiliated homes are the least stable, a big proportion of them switching to the conservative Protestants. Looking at the horizontal row for the nonaffiliated, we see large numbers in all the groups who have abandoned religious affiliations. Growing up in the sixties and seventies, many in this generation dropped out of organized religion altogether.

But switching tells only a part of the story, and in some respects the least interesting part. What about movement in and out of religious institutions, or a change in the level of religious involvement, without a change of affiliation? To get a breakdown on involvement in organized religion, a three-fold classification was used:

Loyalists: Those persons brought up in a religious tradition and who remained involved in one tradition or another.

Dropouts: Persons once involved but who were inactive for a period of two years or more, and were still inactive at the time of the interview.

Returnees: Persons once involved, then dropped out for a period of two years or more, and then returned to active involvement.

As shown in Table 14.3, 42% of the respondents report having remained religiously involved during their teenage and young adult years. They were still involved at the time of our interviews. These loyalists may have switched congregations, possibly even switched denominations or faiths, but they have maintained an institutional religious connection. We do not know how this compares with previous generations in a strict statistical sense, but it appears that the proportion of loyalists coming out of the sixties and seventies is lower than for earlier generations of this century.[2]

Fifty-eight percent have dropped out at one time or another, at least once and often more than once. More than a third of those who dropped out, however, have returned to active involvement. Still this leaves a large proportion of persons who might be thought of as truly dropping out. The three-fold distribution of the boomers then is as follows: 42% Loyalists, 22% Returnees, and 36% Dropouts. Another way of reading the data is that 64% are currently involved in religious institutions, and 36% are disaffiliated and show little sign of re-affiliating with religious institutions.

Of interest are the trends by religious family. Much previous research suggests that the defections of the 1960s and 1970s were greatest in the more liberal Protestant and Jewish traditions. The "religious depression" of the period was brought about largely as a result of young people who dropped

out of the so-called "mainline" religious congregations (Hoge and Roozen, 1979; Roof and McKinney, 1987). Some turned to the new religious movements, some turned to evangelical faiths, but most, it seems, just dropped out. Many explanations of why the more liberal, mainline congregations suffered have been given: too much emphasis on social activism, an identity-crisis brought on by a close association with American middle-class culture—which was in turmoil in the 1960s, and the loss of religious vitality within the Protestant establishment. Whatever the underlying religious and cultural reasons, for many baby boomers the religious mainline had become spiritually stale and unsatisfying. As one of our respondents said about leaving the Methodists in search of a more experiential type of religion: "There was no meat, I got fed a lot of Twinkies."

As Table 14.3 shows, the losses have been greatest for boomers growing up in the more liberal Protestant and Jewish traditions, especially the latter. Eighty-four percent of Jewish boomers have, at one time or another, dropped out of religious participation for a period of two years or more. We have only aggregate figures for Jews and cannot break out patterns for Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox constituencies because of the small size of the sample. More reliable are the data for Protestants and Catholics. Sixty percent of mainline Protestant boomers have dropped out at one time or another—a larger figure than for conservative Protestants or Catholics. Jews can drop out religiously, but are still Jews culturally, and thus still able to sustain a Jewish identity. Conservative Protestants and Catholics who drop out are perhaps better able to sustain a religious identity than mainline Protestants, given the stronger social and psychological bonds holding them to religious beliefs and values. In comparison, liberal Protestantism suffers because there is much less of a cultural boundary separating the tradition from the larger culture. As Martin Marty is fond of saying, liberal Protestants have "alumni associations," which mark their weaker and rather tenuous connections with their religious past.

Overall, men have dropped out more than women, and older boomers more so than younger boomers. The greater defection of males is common. Age differences reflect the periods in which the boomers grew up. The relation of education to dropping out is complex: dropout rates are higher for those with less than a high school education and for post-graduates, and less so for high school and college graduates. Dropping out of religious institutions in the sixties and seventies was not simply a middle-class phenomenon; it occurred at both ends of the class spectrum, among the privileged and the not-so-privileged.

The crucial question has to do with the return to active religious participation. In keeping with the patterns for dropping out, fewer Jewish and main-

line Protestant dropouts have returned to their synagogues and churches: 17% and 34%, respectively. The return is considerably greater for conservative Protestants, 10 percentage points higher than for mainline Protestants. A greater return combined with fewer losses to begin with, along with net gains from switching, means that conservative Protestants enjoy a considerable advantage over mainline Protestants in sustaining their congregations. Catholics fall somewhere in the middle, with a higher return than for mainline Protestants and lesser than for conservative Protestants.

TABLE 14.3
Patterns of Institutional Involvement for Major Traditions

	Total	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Other
Percent ever dropping out:	58%	60%	54%	57%	84%	50%
Of these: Percent who have returned	38	34	44	37	17	23
Current Profile:						
Loyalist	42	39	46	43	16	50
Returnee	22	21	24	21	14	12
Dropout	36	39	30	36	70	38
Total	100	99	100	100	100	100
N =	(1448)	(369)	(460)	(542)	(36)	(41)

Looking at the return in the broader context of religious family profiles, we find the following: conservative Protestants stand out among the major religious families for having the highest proportion of Loyalists, the lowest proportion of Dropouts, and the highest proportion of Returnees—a winning combination for maintaining a vital religious tradition. Probably more than any other large religious group, conservative Protestants have been better able to withstand the corrosive influences of modern culture—the greater religious individualism and voluntarism—undermining institutional loyalty. Roman Catholics are fairly well positioned regarding their young adults, with 43% Loyalists, 21% Returnees, and 36% Dropouts. Mainline Protestants have the weakest profile among Christian groups with only 39% Loyalists, 21% Returnees, and 39% Dropouts. Jews have the weakest profile overall.

Men and women are returning in about equal proportions. Older boomers are returning more than younger boomers, consistent with their greater fam-

ily and parenting obligations. With education, there is a more consistent pattern for returning than with dropping out: the higher the level of education, the lower the rate of return. One-half of dropouts with less than a high school education have returned to church or synagogue; 46% of high school graduates; 40% of college graduates; and only 30% of post-graduates. So we see that social class is a very important factor for boomer involvement in organized religion. Working-class boomers drop out, but are more likely to return to church, whereas well-educated, middle-class boomers who drop out are more likely to join the ranks of disaffiliated. This is especially the case for post-graduates, many of whom belong to the professional and "New Class" sectors.

Is there a return to organized religion? Unquestionably, there is a return. We have no historical estimates of how many youth in the past have dropped out, and then after a while, returned to active involvement. If the proportion dropping out was greater in the sixties and seventies, then there is a large pool of potential returnees. Given the sheer size of the baby boomer generation, it follows that returnees would account for a sizable proportion of the young adult population. Media accounts of a "return to religion" are not incorrect; however, the trend should be kept in perspective—returnees are a smaller proportion than the dropouts who are still outside organized religion. Only for conservative Protestants does the proportion returning come at all close to matching the figures for dropping out.

Who Are the Returnees?

Next we explore the major social and religious background characteristics of the Returnees.

Family Cycle

The most obvious explanation put forth for the return of boomers to organized religion has to do with changes in the family cycle. Boomers dropped out as individuals, but when they return, they often are married with children. There is considerable evidence in the research literature to support this argument (Carroll and Roozen, 1979; Schroeder, 1975; Roozen, McKinney, and Thompson, 1990). Married people are more settled than unmarried, and the presence of children is a stabilizing influence on young couples. The presence of school-age children especially encourages parental religious involvement. Concern for the moral and religious training of children is a factor of some importance across all religious traditions, resulting in more active participation in churches and synagogues.

A follow-up telephone interview to the Lilly Endowment boomer survey with 536 respondents showed that parenting and family situation are crucial variables. This smaller survey found that married persons with children are far more likely to be Loyalists, that is, not to have dropped out of church or synagogue at any time, and even more significantly, to have returned to active religious participation if they had dropped out. Forty-one percent of married people with children are Loyalists and 50% of all who have dropped out are Returnees—much higher than for any of the other constituencies. And it is the case that married people with children are more religious of the several constituencies on a wide array of beliefs, experiences, and attitudes toward organized religion. Data not shown here reveal them to have had less exposure to counter-cultural influences—46% say they have smoked marijuana, whereas considerably more than half have done so in all the other constituencies. They hold far more conservative views on moral issues such as abortion, unmarried couples living together, the legalization of marijuana, respect for authority, and for a return to stricter moral standards.

In contrast, married people without children are the mirror opposite. Only 16% of those who have dropped out in this category are Returnees, considerably lower than for the divorced/separated or even the singles. They rank lower than singles on all the religious items, on some items considerably lower. These findings suggest a changing subculture for married couples who have postponed having children, many of whom have dual careers. Their lower levels of religiosity fit with their more liberal views, more liberal than for singles, on such matters as the legalization of marijuana, legal abortion regardless of reason, unmarried couples living together, and acceptance of alternative life-styles. Age interacts with family situation: within the total baby boom generation married persons without children are generally older than singles, and perhaps surprisingly, tend to be less conservative than the younger wave of boomers, especially on moral and political values.

The divorced/separated are a changing profile group. Past research has often described this constituency as having low rates of religious participation. Traditional family norms are deeply ingrained in all the major religious communities, and for a long time, those whose life-styles deviated from these norms often did not feel accepted in church services and activities. Our research shows them to have the highest numbers who had left organized religion, yet are returning at levels higher than for either married persons without children or singles. That they may be returning in greater numbers is no doubt explained partly by the large proportion who have children—that is, they are single parents. As the size of the single-parent population has increased, and the norms surrounding single-parenting have changed, so have patterns of religious participation. Churches have increasingly accommodated

these trends toward more diverse family-type subcultures with new ministries aimed at the needs of singles, the separated and divorced, and single parents.

Conservative Drift

Another explanation of the return to the churches is the conservative shift in social and political values during the eighties. Roozen, McKinney, and Thompson (1990) argue that a broad shift in values and attitudes was of greater impact on worship attendance than the effects of aging and family changes. By means of test factor standardization, they conclude that more than 70% of the increase in church attendance on the part of older boomers can be accounted for by a turn to more conservative social and political views. Without making a causal argument about the directionality of change, nonetheless they offer incontrovertible evidence that the religious and attitudinal changes have occurred simultaneously.

Unquestionably, there has been a shift in this generation's values and attitudes. The *Rolling Stone* Survey (see Sheff, 1988), for example, shows that attitudes of boomers have changed drastically in three areas: drug usage, sexuality, and family life. Whereas 46% in this survey admitted to using drugs when they were growing up, 74% (and 94% of parents) now say they disapprove of their children experimenting with drugs. A generation that was extremely active sexually now holds to much less permissive views for their children in the age of AIDS. But even without this new plague, the emphasis on sexual freedom would likely have diminished. Permissive attitudes on sex are incompatible with the strong emphasis on family life now expressed by boomers. Families and friendships are now both high priorities, contrary to an earlier emphasis on self as suggested in stereotypes such as the "Me Generation."

The Lilly Endowment boomer survey underscores as well the importance of changing values and priorities. Returnees are considerably more conservative in life-style issues, moral values, and political attitudes than those who dropped out. But more is involved than simply changing attitudes and priorities. If it were just that, then we would expect a more uniform, across-the-board shift in churchgoing. The research suggests that the sixties had a deep and lasting impact: those most affected by the counter-cultural trends of that era are the ones least likely now to return to the churches. Those who were exposed to drugs and rock music, who have endorsed sexual freedom, and who have engaged in demonstrations and marches during the civil rights and anti-war movements at the time are much less likely to be affiliated with organized religion today. Even if their attitudes and values have shifted in more recent times in the conservative direction, the scars from that earlier period have not vanished.

Religious Background

Returnees—unlike Dropouts—did not, for the most part, make a clean break with religious institutions when they were growing up. They dropped out but never totally left. During their adolescence and early adulthood, the age at which most religious defection occurred, they remained more involved in churches and synagogues than did Dropouts. In the Lilly Endowment boomer survey, 41% of those who have returned were attending religious services once a month or more during their youth; in contrast, among Dropouts the figure was 25%. However, Returnees are only slightly more likely to have parents who were religiously involved than Dropouts. More important than parental religiosity in predicting return to active involvement was the person's own experience and involvement during the critical period of institutional disengagement: many made a total break with organized religion, others simply took leave for a while but did not really break with their traditions.

What Kind of Return?

We know there is a return to religion on the part of boomers as described above. But what kind of return is it? How committed are the returnees to the churches and synagogues? These are crucial questions considering the social and cultural changes of the sixties and seventies. Two lines of thinking point to reduced levels of commitment for returnees: changing attitudes toward public social institutions, and high levels of cultural and religious individualism on the part of this generation. Briefly, we examine these two arguments.

There is ample evidence to suggest that members of this generation are less trusting of public social institutions. Starting in the sixties and lasting into the present, the baby boomers led the way in raising questions about the government in particular, but not just the government. Asked in 1985 by the Gallup Poll to rate a list of ten major social and political institutions without reference to their leaders, the baby boomers emerged as the least trusting of all age groups toward eight: organized religion, the military, banks/banking, public schools, Congress, newspapers, big business, and organized labor (Light, 1988:161). Asked by the Harris poll to rate the leaders of fifteen institutions in 1985, the baby boomers were the least trusting toward eight: organized religion, the military, the press, TV news, major companies, the White House, Congress, and the Executive Branch (Light, 1988:160). The trauma surrounding civil rights, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and one after another environmental disaster all heightened levels of distrust and suspicion of people in authority.

The "distancing" from institutions that many members of this generation experienced continues to shape loyalties and commitments. Data from Table

14.4 show rather convincingly that on a range of indicators of institutional religious commitment Returnees consistently score lower than Loyalists. They are somewhat less likely to consider themselves religious, to believe in God, to hold church membership, to view the congregation as important, to attend regular services, to have a strong denominational identity, and to feel closer to others of the same religion than to other people. These patterns hold for Catholics and Protestants, and for older and younger boomers.

TABLE 14.4
Religious Indicators for Loyalists and Returnees

	Loyalist (N=174)	Returnees (N=128)
Consider yourself religious	98%	92%
Definitely believe in God	94	86
Church member	88	82
Congregation important in life	91	83
Attends services once a week or more	63	56
Strong denominational identity	63	53
Feel closer to others in the same religion than to other people	45	41

A second argument is that high levels of cultural and religious individualism erode traditional religious authority. For Americans generally, religious individualism is of course quite high. But even more so for boomers, the "culture of choice" as reflected in great tolerance of diversity, open-mindedness, and respect for personal life-style preferences, has reached unprecedented proportions. The post-war generation is, in the sense in which Karl Mannheim spoke, the major carrier of cultural changes stemming from the sixties, described variously as "expressive utilitarianism" (Bellah et al., 1985) and the "new voluntarism" (Roof and McKinney, 1987). The changes reach deep in the human psyche re-ordering outlooks and orientations, away from social conformity to greater emphasis on self: wants, feelings, preferences, fulfillments, and inner experiences all get priority in a shift from an "objectivist" to a more "subjectivist" locus of control.

What this all means for religious commitment is open for considerable speculation. Yet there is reason to think that this shift, in many subtle ways, is reshaping institutional religious norms. For example, among Catholic baby boomers, 88% say that one can be a "good Catholic" without contributing

money regularly to the Church; 85% say the same about going to Church every Sunday; 81% with respect to obeying the Church's teaching on divorce and remarriage. Interestingly, however, only 19% of boomers say one can be a "good Catholic" without being concerned about the poor. Boomers reject the Church's historic obligatory practices and moral teachings, yet at the same time demonstrate overwhelming support for the Church's teachings on social justice. This points less to a wholesale rejection of the Church's teachings than to a redefinition of a good Catholic now evolving among members of this generation. That the Church must increasingly listen to this generation is apparent: 95% of Catholic boomers think that the development of Church teachings should be in the hands of both the hierarchy and the laity, not just in the hands of the hierarchy alone.

We examined shifts in approaches to religious participation and found, for Catholics as well as Protestants, some changes associated with religious individualism. Because Returnees were (and still are) more caught up in the cultural whirlwinds of the sixties, we expected their institutional orientations to be even more pronounced in the individualistic, voluntaristic direction. We constructed two measures trying to get at subtle differences in orientations. One was a question on how going to church or synagogue was viewed, as a "duty and obligation" or as "something you do if you feel it meets your needs." Boomers overwhelmingly endorse the latter, and Returnees, as expected, are especially strong in endorsing this more expressive, self-oriented view in greater proportion (see Table 14.5). A second question touched upon a highly normative view about families attending church and synagogue as a unit versus the possibility of family members making individual choices about their participation. Boomers overwhelmingly endorse the normative model of family and religion, but Returnees are more caught up in the individualistic culture than Loyalists. A third of Returnees subscribe to this latter as compared to 21% of the Loyalist constituency. Returnees in the mainline religious traditions are even more individualistic in outlook than are conservative Returnees, further intensifying an already-existing problem of institutional commitment for mainline Protestantism.

That there are qualitative changes in the commitment of many boomers returning (or at least exploring the possibility of returning) to churches and synagogues appears to be unquestionable. Boomers are returning, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are joining congregations. More so than their parents, they are apt to "shop" with a consumer mentality for both a congregation and denomination that meets their personal, ideological, and family needs. There is considerable fluidity, of people switching denominations and selecting congregations because of an exciting worship leader, good music, social action program, shared concerns, self-help recovery

TABLE 14.5
Religious Individualism for Loyalists and Returnees

	Loyalist	Returnee
Which expresses your view:		
(a) Going to church/synagogue is a duty and obligation, or	23%	16%
(b) Going to church/synagogue is something you do if you feel it meets your needs	62	73
(c) both	15	11
	100%	100%
Is it important to you to attend church/synagogue as a family or should family members make individual choices?		
(a) As family	79	65
(b) Individual choice	21	32
(c) Don't know	—	3
	100%	100%

groups, religious education programs, even a large and convenient parking lot. Once boomers start attending a particular church, for whatever reason, others often come simply because of the presence of large numbers of their own generation. Quality of services offered to individuals and families is far more important than denominational heritage for most of our respondents. Personal concerns and spiritual quests shape the character of religious discourse in congregations where boomers are numerous. There is considerable yearning on the part of many to find out more about religious traditions, to explore spirituality, and to find in the great smorgasbord of religious possibilities that America offers, new spiritual insights that are meaningful and worthy of their commitment. Many are looking not only for insights, but also for ways to be of service, for opportunities to give of their time and support to causes and projects that seem worthwhile.

Future Trends

What about future trends? Can we make any projections about the religious involvement of boomers? Projections are of course risky, but we do get some clues from the age-based differences among the boomers.

Age is a major division within the boomer population: those born at the front end of the generation in the late forties are quite different from those born at

the very back in the early sixties. Fifteen years apart, the two constituencies have had differing cohort experiences. Older boomers remember freedom marches and the assassination of President Kennedy; they came of age in a period of counter-cultural and political turmoil and were deeply affected by the Vietnam War. People now in their late thirties and early forties experienced the sixties head-on and were the most transformed by that momentous decade. In contrast, younger baby boomers are more likely to remember gas lines in the seventies, Three Mile Island, and Chernobyl; they came of age in a quieter time marked less by social protest than by scarcity and a return to greater inwardness; generally they have achieved an easier blend of pragmatism and idealism than those of their generation who are older. Douglas Walrath (1987) speaks of older boomers as "challengers," prone to question authority and conventionality, and the younger ones as "calculators," more inclined to see life as involving hard choices and calling for priorities.

Cohort experience and life-cycle factors interact to create distinctive religious patterns in any generation (see Roof and Walsh, 1993), and certainly this is the case for the boomers. As already observed with the NORC data, older boomers are returning to organized religion in greater numbers proportionately than younger boomers. But simply because the older boomers are returning does not mean that they are the most religious in other ways (see Table 14.6). Younger boomers are more religious on measures of personal faith and practice: they consider themselves more religious and affirm traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices more so than do older members of the generation. This is true across a wide spectrum ranging from belief in the Devil to conflict between religion and science. Interesting, also, they are more inclined to say they would call upon religious institutions for "rites of passage" for themselves or for family members—for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. To say this does not of course mean that they will necessarily follow through with such rites, but it does suggest a higher level of normative religious expectations. Their greater religious traditionalism goes hand in hand with a more conservative stance generally. Younger boomers voted for Bush in 1988 in greater numbers than did older boomers, view themselves more as political conservatives, and hold to more conventional views on moral issues than older boomers.

All of this might portend an even greater return to organized religion in the 1990s. As the younger boomers grow older and assume family and parenting responsibilities, they might return to congregations in larger numbers than have the older boomers. Much depends, of course, on the churches themselves. If the churches can effectively relate to the values, life-styles, and concerns of this generation, boomers will return. Churches that are effective in this, we would expect, will be those that can create a climate where boomers

TABLE 14.6
Religious Characteristics of Older and Younger Baby Boomer Cohorts

	Older	Younger
Institutional Involvement		
Percent Loyalist	35%	32%
Percent Dropping Out		
Of these:	65	86
Percent Returnee	43	38
Percent Dropout	57	62
Personal Beliefs and Practices		
Consider to be religious	83	89
Say grace at meals	36	39
Believe in eternal life	80	83
Believe in Devil	61	67
Born again	43	45
View religion and science in conflict	53	63
Attitudes toward Organized Religion		
Consider church membership important	67	60
Would expect to call upon institution for rites for self or family:		
Baptism	71	82
Wedding	74	86
Funeral	85	90

feel comfortable and where the religious narratives encompass their own life stories. Tex Sample (1990) is surely right when he says that programming will greatly differ, depending on whether the constituency aimed at is on the cultural left or the cultural right. Upper middle-class, cultural-left people relate to journey theology and spiritual quests, whereas working-class, cultural-right people relate more to traditional family values and conventional moral and religious thinking. Multi-layered spirituality combining themes from across religious traditions will characterize the former (as one of our respondents said, "I am a Presbyterian into wholistic thinking); more orthodox Christian interpretations are held to among the latter.

Whether the boomer's religious questions and concerns will carry over to institutional commitment is the big question. Despite all the media attention to the "return of the boomers," regular religious attendance in the polls does

not appear to have significantly increased. Highly voluntaristic norms of religious belonging are deeply ingrained in this generation, among younger as well as older members, and this will likely be the predominate shaping influence on styles of congregational involvement in the future. Reginald Bibby's (1987) "a la carte" style of religious belief seems to be the wave of the future for this generation, which probably means that we can expect a great deal of continued shopping around for religious themes, and even within a religious community considerable picking and choosing of what to believe and how to practice what one believes. Every congregation has its own ethos, and the extent and style of commitment will vary depending on whether or not boomers can relate their lives to what is going on in a particular locale. The congregations attracting boomers will be those that can discern the spirit of the times, and are able to respond in ways that are genuinely real, authentic, and deemed meaningful.