

How to be the Church in a Society that Has Gained the Whole World

*A transcription of an address by Robert Bellah
At the Annual Meeting of the
Association of Nazarene Sociologists of Religion
March 1999*

On the surface, at least, these would seem to be millennial times indeed, especially for America. If we look back at the nightmare that is history, and never more than in the 20th century, it would be hard to find a better time than the present. Internationally our great enemies, the Axis Powers in World War II, and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, have been vanquished. Our military power is unchallenged, except by minor powers that we could overcome in days, if we really needed to. Our leadership is accepted virtually everywhere in the world. Domestically conditions have seldom been more favorable, not only is our economy unprecedentedly prosperous but we have a budget surplus and are actually paying down our national debt. Looking into the news this morning, I saw that they were thinking on Wall Street they may hit 10,000. I gather all the broker's computers are going to collapse at 10,000, because they are not set up for that. So all of us with retirement money in the market may lose it all today, but nonetheless, we will see. Consumer spending has never been higher. Unemployment has not been lower in decades.

And yet. I think you know from the opening paragraph that there is going to be an "And yet" coming. Though we are as a people reasonably happy with our lives, we are not as ecstatically happy as these objective facts might suggest we should be. Indeed, along with considerable satisfaction there is a great deal of unease. One recent study found that 75% of the public said that the breakdown of communities is a serious national problem. Although 90% said it is important to participate in community organizations, only 21% said they actually did so. But before exploring the sources of the unease that lies just below the surface of our society, I must point out another element in our success that is of a special interest in the context of a Protestant Theological Seminary. There is reason to believe that our Protestant faith has something to do with our extraordinary national achievements. In an as unpublished paper, my colleague in the Haas School of Business at Berkeley, David Vogel, has looked at the 21 richest nations in today's world. I talked about this extensively last night. I am only going to allude to it this morning. His purpose in this study was to understand why, although all rich nations have embraced the cause of environmentalism, some have done so much more enthusiastically than others. He divided the 21 nations into 2 groups: 11 he denominates as light green, concerned mainly with the quality of air and water that directly affect their population; and 10 he denominates as dark green, concerned with the whole ecosphere, with endangered species, rain forests, ozone holes, all the rest. Now his stunning discovery, and I think it was a discovery because he had no notion of this before he undertook his work, is that all but one of the 10 dark green countries, and the exception is Austria and I think there is reason to believe that is not really an exception, but I won't go into that, all but one of the 10 dark green countries are of Protestant heritage. And none of the eleven light green countries are. The latter included six Catholic countries, one Greek Orthodox country (Greece), one Jewish country (Israel), and three Confucian Buddhist countries (Japan, Korea, and Taiwan).

But the correlations do not stop there. Vogel found that the Protestant countries compared to the non-Protestant countries are the richest, with the exception of Japan; have been rich the longest; are the most modern, have been modern the longest; and are the most democratic and

have been democratic the longest; as well as having the most vibrant civic cultures. There does seem to be a correlation between Protestant heritage, economic prosperity, and successful democracy, as well as, Vogel discovered, strong environmentalism.

Here is a double challenge to those of us who are not entirely ecstatic in this moment of millennial triumph. Not only is our country, the United States, extraordinarily successful, but our religious heritage seems to have a lot to do with it. How can we explain these connections? It would take the rest of this talk to even begin to sketch in the historical sociology that might answer that question. Here I can only make a couple of brief suggestions. All across the old world in the first millennium B.C., there emerged transcendental religions, religious traditions that still infuse the lives of most human beings today. The great religion is what we call the world religions. They all originate either in that period or, as in the case of Islam, as a later development of things that emerged in that period. There emerged these transcendental religions that called the existing structures of the world into question in the face of a higher reality. In our tradition the turning point came with the teachings of the Hebrew prophets about the will of God, teachings we believe were fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ at the end of that millennium. But while the prophetic movement in Israel and the early Christian church were able to challenge the hierarchical and authoritarian powers of this world, they were not able to transform them. Indeed, the powers of aristocratic domination all across the old world succeed in domesticating the new universalistic religions and turning them into sources of their own legitimation, though never completely. The life of faith went on in monasteries, sabbaticals, lay-guilds, local congregations, occasionally challenging the powers that be, as in the case of people like St. Francis or Jan Hus, but never successfully overcoming the world.

What made Protestantism unique was not just its ethic, which after all was rooted in the New Testament and shared by the most devout Christians down through the ages, but the possibility of gaining sufficient political influence in Geneva, the Netherlands, England, and New England, to actually institutionalize that ethic in the major spheres of social life.

Protestantism gave rise to what these days is called a "disciplinary revolution" that operated at a number of levels. A code of systematic ethical action expected from all believers. New institutions capable of enforcing the code and new solidary organizations strong enough to influence political and economic developments. Very important that this great Protestant transformation came from below. Came from local people organized together, but then insisting that their voice be heard in democratic forms of political organization. What was in one sense a new level of control, because it was largely internal and shared by laity and clergy alike, this control was self control. It turned out to have explosive energies in releasing new possibilities all across the sphere of human activity. Weber was particularly interested in the enormous possibilities it open up in the economic sphere. But we can also see now that science, technology and very importantly democratic institutions were all part of this transformation in which, as Weber said, "religion came out of the monasteries and into the world. What once had been expected only of the most dedicated monks was now expected of the laity." The kind of control and self discipline, a kind of willingness to take on the heaviest tasks of this world, not to withdraw beyond the walls of a monastery.

Nowhere more than in America has this world transforming potentiality of Protestantism been apparent. And Timothy Smith in his important book *Revivalism and Social Reform*, in which he shows that the whole social reform movement of the 19th century came out of

evangelical Protestantism, went on in a later book, *Called Unto Holiness*, to describe the distinct contribution to social reform of the early holiness leaders, from whom your own church descends. Quoting Smith, "Finney, Boardman, and Phoebe Palmer had kindled the hopes of an idealistic age. The doctrine of entire sanctification, like the crusades against slavery, drunkenness and pauperism, appeal to a widespread confidence that all the world's evil could be done away. The holiness movement was born of great revivals. It prospered from the newly employed energies of laymen and women preachers. And it was in large measure centered in the cities." So much from Timothy Smith.

True though these observations are, much of our society we live in today is the product in a whole range of ways of reformation and post-reformation Protestantism. We cannot really imagine that the early holiness leaders, any more than Martin Luther, John Calvin or John Wesley, would have been utterly delighted with the society in which we live today, or with the other eight most successful Protestant nations, for that matter.

What went wrong? How is it that societies in which Protestantism has played the leading role and therefore, I would argue, has penetrated the social structure more deeply than any religion has ever done in the history of human beings and while in many ways these societies are among the best societies history has ever seen, are still so far from we might have hoped. And even in some ways seem to be, in spite of present appearances, in very real danger of loss of meaning and internal collapse. That is the big questions I want to ask today. But I am far from able to answer it. It is a question we will be needing to ask ourselves for quite a long time. And anyone entering the ministry had better be thinking about these questions. How did so essentially a Protestant society go wrong? Last night I tried to show that in many areas where neither we nor the people themselves, like the dark green environmentalists, see themselves as Protestant, there is a Protestant cultural code at work in their lives beyond their consciousness. We live in a deeply Protestant society and yet one that is as problematic as it has ever been.

It would be convenient if we could blame all of the things that worry us on secularism, which is the topic of the ANSR colloquium these days. Although, here again, what in the world secularism is or means is a highly debatable term. This might work together in some other Protestant heritage countries where church membership and attendance is very low and has been declining for a long time. But the majority of Americans are Protestants and most of them are church members and though the exact figures are debated, many of them do attend church every Sunday and many of them attend church at least several times a year. So, if we Protestants still carry so much weight in our society, it is unlikely that if things are seriously wrong we are entirely without blame and even more unlikely that aspects of the very heritage we treasure may not have been vulnerable to distortions that have had serious negative consequences. I note that the third article in your Nazarene statement of belief is that man is born with a fallen nature and is therefore inclined to evil, and that continuously. If that is true, and I sincerely believe it is true, it is possible that we have distorted even some of the best things in our heritage and so contributed to the very outcomes that dismay us.

I remember as a teenager, in the early 1940s, hearing Thomas Mann, the great German novelist who had fled Hitler's Germany and was living then in the United States, speak of the deep ambiguities of German culture. Another culture, I might remind you, deeply formed by Protestantism. A culture which has given us some of the greatest music, philosophies, science. You look at the achievements of the modern world and so many of them come from Germany.

But it was also a culture that was in special ways vulnerable to the appeal of Nazism. And Mann warned us not to be too quick to distinguish the good from the bad in German culture because they are so deeply intermixed. Perhaps, although we never produced as awful as Nazism, it is still true that the best and the worst in our Protestant and American tradition are closer together than we might ever wish to believe.

Let me make two suggestions about how certain central Protestant beliefs have been vulnerable to distortion. Max Weber credited the great universalistic religions that arose in the first millennium B.C. with a strong rejection of magic. The Jewish prophets taught us that no worship of idols, no propitiation of spirits with sacrifice and incense would save us. As Micah says, "and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?"

The reformers took the opposition to magic very seriously, attacking the doctrine of transubstantiation and other Catholic practices that they deemed magical. In their fear of idolatry they in effect, and particularly the Calvinists, pushed God out of the world into radical transcendence. With the doctrine of predestination, Calvin, or if as some scholars believe not Calvin but some of his followers, described a God who had preordained everything that can occur before the beginning of time. It was natural for some philosophers and scientists to move from that idea to a deterministic physical universe without a personal God at all. "I have no need of that hypothesis," as one of them said. So Calvin's powerful doctrine of divine transcendence paradoxically opened the door to atheistic naturalism. Even more ominously, into the empty space left by the absence of God came an understanding of the self as absolutely autonomous that borrows an essential attribute of God to apply to the conception of the self. But if the Calvinist concentration on God the Father could go astray, so also in another branch of Protestantism could too exclusive a focus on God the Son. When the personal relation of the believer to Jesus becomes the exclusive focus of piety, then the doctrine of the God man can slip into the doctrine of the man god. The divinization of the self is often called gnosticism and Harold Bloom in his interesting book *The American Religion* sees gnosticism as the quintessentially American religion and he says this not as a critic but as a believer, for he proclaims himself a Gnostic. And this might surprise you if you haven't read the book, but he sees the Southern Baptists as a major source of American Gnosticism. The exclusive focus on a personal relation of the believer to Jesus is one of the main sources of this, what I would consider, distortion. If I may trace the downward spiral of this particular Protestant distortion let me say that the next stage is what we found in some of our interviews in *Habits of the Heart*. If I am all right with Jesus then I don't need the church. Just me and Jesus. Why do I need what is now negatively called institutional religion?

It progresses then to something else we described in *Habits*, Sheila-ism. A woman named Sheila Larson, of course that is not her real name, but she did say this, she defined her faith as Sheila-ism; just my own little voice. But Sheila-ism seems positively benign compared to the end of the road in this direction, which comes out with remarkable force in an interview recounted in Robert Wuthnow's latest book *Loose Connections*, about which I will have more to say later. A man in his late twenties who works as a financial analyst describes the individualism that he says "you're just brought up to believe in," as follows: (these are the words of this twenty-something interviewee of Wuthnow) The individual is the preeminent being in the universe. There is always a distinction between me and you. Community sharing cannot truly exist. What I have is mine

and it is mine because I deserve it and I have a right to it. We can only hope he knows not what he says. The individual is the preeminent being in the universe.

Now I know that John Wesley tried to avoid both of these pitfalls. He had a much greater sense of the possibility of holiness in this world than did the Calvinists. And he had a much stronger ecclesiology, a sense of the central importance of the company of the saints, the body of Christ, than did the radically individualistic sectarians. He helped to maintain his balance with a strong doctrine of the Holy Spirit and I think strong Trinitarianism is the best defense against all these distortions. I hope that you Nazarenes, as committed Wesleyans, have been able to steer that middle course. But I know that you also live in a surrounding culture and that its influence is hard to avoid. I particularly noticed in some of the literature that was sent to me the mention of the influence of the Southern Baptists on your congregations to the extent that some speak of the Baptistification of the Nazarenes. As I will point out later, the general tendency of American evangelism toward a private piety pulls everyone influenced by it very much in this direction. Some may think that "Jesus and me" piety is very different from the individual as the preeminent being in the universe, but I am suggesting they are only a hair apart.

In order to understand how we got here from there, and also to illustrate my theme that the best is often uncomfortably close to the worst, let me return to the world of the 19th century and to the figure of John D. Rockefeller. Quintessential Protestant, he was naturally a Baptist and Capitalist. Jackson Lears is reviewing a new biography of Rockefeller that has captured the two sides of the man. The concealment of economic aggression in Protestant morality was not mere hypocrisy. For centuries Protestantism had promoted ambivalence towards wealth. Money could be a sign of God's grace, but it could also be a temptation to idleness and extravagance. Wesley was intensely aware of this problem.

The doctrines of stewardship solved the problem by declaring that the money was on loan from God. The rich man's duty was to distribute as much as possible during his lifetime. From this perspective, "he who dies rich dies disgraced," as Andrew Carnegie declared. Stewardship could relax the tensions between private gain and public good but only if the wealthy took the doctrine to heart. Lears continues, "but few rich Americans did so more fervently than John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Cold-hearted capitalist, destroyer of rivals, disdainer of unions, he was also the premier philanthropist of his age, perhaps of any age." "God gave me my money," he said, and there was no arrogance in the claim. Ruthless accumulations were sanctified through charitable benefactions. His career, he assumed, was all of the piece. Rockefeller combined an absolutely earnest appearance with extremely flexible ethics. Early on he learned how to distance himself from personal moral responsibility through a complex hyper-organized delegation of authority. His devious stratagems served to promote all sort of social evil, yet the man remained a paragon of personal righteousness, and in the long run, philanthropic generosity. Rockefeller's career showed how the Protestant ethic could survive the shift from an entrepreneurial to a managerial society. He never doubted his place among the saved.

As part of the transformation from entrepreneurial to managerial forms of organization. Rockefeller was involved in the development of tendencies that have become all too commonplace in our own time. To go back to Jackson Lears again, "In the corporate and legal labyrinths of the late 19th century, one can see the notions of truth and innocence beginning to be transformed into the notions of credibility and deniability. If the facade of deniability cracked, this paragon of Protestant morality was perfectly willing to perjure himself." And we know that

he did so under oath, not infrequently. Rockefeller's career demands to be judged not only by the standards of gilded age business, but also by the standards of his own Protestant Christianity, a religion that celebrated sincerity and demonized deception, that envisioned a righteous community of plain speaking believers who treated each other fairly and honestly, who said what they meant, and meant what they said. Yet Rockefeller's success depended upon the deceitful manipulation of appearances. It was a world governed by the model, "Do unto others as they would do unto you and do it first." And that is the reverse of Christianity.

And yet there is no denying Rockefeller's sincerity with respect to stewardship, or the farsightedness of his gifts. The systemization of giving ironically paralleled the systemization of getting that Rockefeller had perfected in the oil business. The world of privately endowed universities and foundations represented a kinder gentler face of the WASP managerial ethic. And it would take hours to recite all of his good deeds, from the founding of the University of Chicago to the building of the Riverside Church in New York City, the restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia, the Rockefeller Foundation, and on, and on, and on. How are we to reconcile the two sides of this extraordinary man? Lears opts for the notion of compartmentalization; the idea that Rockefeller never let the two sides of himself come into contact. But that remark of Lears leads to another explanation. Lears writes, "He simply could not conceive a public interest that might undermine the interests of his firm." I think Rockefeller was so convinced of his own salvation, was so certain that his work was the work of God, that he could justify any treachery toward rivals, any exploitation of his workers, any violation of the public good as all in a higher service. God's favor led him to believe he was beyond human judgment. He had succumbed to the greatest sin of the religious man; to confuse his own will with the will of God.

The great irony of the Rockefeller career is even beyond this contrast between extraordinarily awful things that he did and the great benefactions that he gave, to the fact that he was responsible for the creation, along with others (Carnegie and so on), of these great impersonal corporations who live only by the profit margin. And his influence on our lives has increased enormously since his time. If we can see in the intense Protestant piety of Rockefeller the union of the best and the worst aspects of American life a century ago, where are we today? When these corporate structures that Rockefeller, Carnegie and their friends had so much to do with are creating a powerful impact on every aspect of our lives. If the period of the turn of the century was a period of rampant economic excesses, excesses that would be brought under partial control by the development of many regulatory agencies beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, we should not forget that it was a period of great institution building, as you are aware, since the Church of the Nazarene, although its roots are deep, was founded in 1908. The 4-H movement was founded in 1900. The NAACP was founded in 1909; Camp Fire Boys & Girls founded in 1910; Kiwanis in 1915. These are only a few of the many voluntary associations and societies that would have such an important influence on how life was lived in American small towns, big cities and suburbs, at least until the 1960s and 1970s. But since the early '70s, many of these organizations have been in sharp decline. The church is holding out the longest, but even they are beginning to show signs of weakening.

What has been happening in our society in the last 20-30 years that has led the 75% of our people to complain about the breakdown of community, as I mentioned earlier? What has been happening can be summed up in the title of Robert Wuthnow's new book *Loose Connections*.

People aren't plugged in very tightly to groups and associations. They may volunteer a few hours a week for a while, but they won't join an organization which will expect their loyalty and commitment for the long haul, or at least they are much more reluctant to do so than once they were. *Loose Connections* is a powerful metaphor and I can't help drawing a conclusion from it that Wuthnow doesn't stress. Loose connections can be dangerous, can lead to a fire, can lead to catastrophe.

Wuthnow pairs the metaphor of loose connections with another metaphor, which partly explains it. Porous institutions. Porous institutions are ones which don't hold individuals very securely. Porous institutions are ones which leak. In a world of porous institutions it is hard to have any connections that are not loose. One thing says the family. Whereas in 1960, one in four marriages would fail. Today one in two will fail. A lot of things go along with that. The fastest growing category of households in America today is those with one member which now amount to 25% of all households. Families as we know do not necessarily consist of two parents and two children. Husbands and wives drift in and out often bringing children from former marriages with them, resulting in what is called blended families. However successfully families are coping with these conditions, and I certainly know that many are, there is always the uncertainty. Will this marriage last? Will my parents divorce? Anyone who works with children today knows that fear is always in the back of their mind.

Work, the other great source of personal identity, besides family, for most Americans, has also become increasingly porous. Holly Hokeshield in her book, *The Time Bind*, reports a factory worker in a corporation she studied saying, "In the last 30 years while I have had this job, I've had two marriages, both of which broke up and several girl friends in between. This job is my family." Unfortunately, Holly reports that he was about to be downsized.

In *Habits of the Heart* we talked about jobs, careers and callings, as three increasingly engaged ways of thinking about work. But not only have jobs become intransigent and insecure, careers are increasingly vulnerable to change. Wuthnow writes, "The median number of different careers listed by people age 45 or over in the U.S. labor force is now three. The traditional pattern of working in only one career now typifies 21% of all workers age 45 or over." If job and career are uncertain, then we may wonder how many people actually find a calling.

Most of the attention to changes in the work force has been directed to the business world where downsizing has led to the loss of millions of relatively secure, well paying jobs. Job growth has surpassed job loss as we know, but many if not most of the new jobs both pay less and have fewer benefits. Part-time and temporary employment has boomed. So called out-sourcing means that work formerly done by regular employees is now done by contracted workers without benefits. But pressures that are apparent in the business world are felt in every sector of American life. For profit HMOs have turned formerly independent physicians into, in effect, hired employees with less and less control over the conditions of their work. Pat Benner could tell you what has happened to the nursing profession, the collapse of adequate care in many places. Law firms have been in a similar situation where concern for the bottom line has led to the firing of partners that would have been once considered unthinkable. Although attracting less public attention, the academic fields have been particularly hard hit by the effect of bottom line pressures on employment practices. Wuthnow notes that in American higher education the proportion of faculty that were in part-time positions rose from 32% in 1980 to

47% in 1996. At a time when student enrollment is increasing, regular faculty slots have been shrinking. Tenure is not being abolished. It is simply dying by attrition. I am interested in not only the cold external facts but in their human consequences because I know the personal travail these circumstances cause. I want to say a little more about these changes in the academic world but they are representative of changes in virtually every part of our society. Robert Darington in the latest issue of the *New York Review of Books* describes what life is like for many who "fall into the floating population of adjuncts, lecturers and part-time teachers of all varieties." Most independent or adjunct scholars have to scramble for a living, picking up odd jobs wherever they can find them, usually for inadequate pay, insufficient benefits and no recognition. We may be producing the intellectual equivalent of the Okies and Arkies from the dust-bowl years, migrant academic workers with laptop computers who live out of the back seats of their cars. Yes, it is funny. But not when you know these people as I do. Recent graduates of our department, one of the top three departments in the country in my field who are actually in this situation and feeling what is it like, especially if there is a child on the way. What kind of future?

Wuthnow links the increasing ferocity of our basic institutions of family and work to the decline of traditional voluntary associations. If we can't be sure about our marriage or our job tomorrow, we are not likely to take on a long-term commitment to the Rotary Club, the PTA or the NAACP. But there is another consequence with major negative implications. When people have loose connections and live in porous institutions, then their level of trust begins to fall. We are not surprised to hear that the proportion of Americans who reply that they trust the government in Washington only some of the time or almost never has risen from 30% in 1966 to 75% in 1992. But are we prepared to hear that the proportion of Americans who say that most people can be trusted fell by more than a third between 1960 when 58% chose that alternative and 1993 when only 37% did.

If Robert Putnam is right in his famous article Bowling Alone and subsequent publications, and I know his findings have been contested, but I believe his basic argument holds up, then decline in associational membership and public trust are the two most important indices of a decline of what he calls social capital. Social capital is the basic resource that societies can call upon to solve their problems. It is indispensable in a democracy. You can do without social capital in an authoritarian regime. The government will do it. But where you rely on citizen participation, social capital is what makes it possible. And if it is in decline, then everything is in trouble. Along with declining associational membership and declining public trust, the decline in the percentage of the population that votes in national, state and local elections is another symptom of our underlying problem. Our democratic institutions along with our familial and work institutions are all in trouble. No wonder people are worried about the breakdown of communities and are not as ecstatic as we might expect under the conditions of surface prosperity.

Perhaps I have now indicated part of what my title suggests, eluding as it does to Mark's gospel, 8:36, "For what shall a profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" If we have lost our trust in others, have loose connections with them and live in porous institutions, have we not come close to losing our own identities, our sense of self, our very souls?

I want to use the rest of this talk to deal with the first part of my title; how to be the church in such a society. First of all, churches are not invulnerable to the social changes I have been

describing, although some are more vulnerable than others. We have all heard about the emergence of the baby boom and post-baby boom generations of what are called "seekers." That is people who are interested in spirituality but view the church more as a transient resource than as something to belong to. Already we heard in our interviews for *Habits of the Heart* in the early 80's, people saying, "I am not religious, but I am very spiritual." I mean, we did not know what that meant. We had to find out. We learned that by religious, people meant belonging to a church, by spiritual they meant various forms of private or small group practice that did not entail actual membership in any enduring community. Seekers are spiritual folks in this sense who may join a church but they do so hesitantly, provisionally and they monitor what they are getting to see if they could get more somewhere else. And of course they do switch churches, sometimes frequently. Not only do they switch congregations, they also switch denominations. Among the many such changes in recent times has been a marked decline in denominational loyalty, or even denominational literacy. Many Americans could not really tell you how a Baptist is different from a Presbyterian, or how either differ from a Methodist or a Nazarene. But in a society where people are switching married partners and jobs and have only provisional loyalty to either, then why should we be surprised if people switch churches and have little sense of denominational loyalty.

As I have indicated some churches are more vulnerable to the changes I have been describing than others. In a book published just last year called *American Evangelicalism*, Christian Smith, who teaches now at the University of North Carolina, (we are trying to lure him to Berkeley), studies variations between different groups of Protestants and what he calls "religious vitality." He measures religious vitality not simply by the frequency of church attendance, as many studies do, but on a number of different dimensions of which church attendance is only one. He writes, "We will consider any American Christian faith tradition to be strong when its members: 1) faithfully adhere to essential Christian religious beliefs; 2) consider their faith a highly salient aspect of their lives; 3) reflect great confidence and assurance in their religious beliefs; 4) participate regularly in a variety of church activities and programs; 5) are committed in both belief and action to accomplishing the mission of their church; 6) sustain high rates of membership retention." What makes this study interesting, but a bit problematic since it cannot be easily compared to other studies, is that he compares what he calls "faith traditions" rather than denominations. His four groups of Protestants are fundamentalist, evangelicals, mainline and liberal and they are based not on denominational membership but on self-attribution. Which one of these four would you put yourself in? And then he does his work with the answers. Thus in Smith's study a Southern Baptist could be a liberal if self identified as such. And conversely an Episcopalian could be an evangelical. And we know, of course empirically, that every large denomination has members across the spectrum. We know we can't go simply from denomination to knowing where people are in these regards. Given what we know about the declining importance of denominational identity and we know from other work that it is declining all across the spectrum, including the most conservative denominations, using self attribution makes sense, but then it does render a problem with comparison because all of our other data used denominations.

Without going into the details of his measurement, I can summarize Smith's findings as follows: On most measures of religious vitality evangelicals come out the strongest. Mainliners and liberals come out the weakest with fundamentalists marginally but consistently weaker than evangelicals. Remember that these are statistical comparisons. Smith is not saying that all

mainliners and liberals lack a vigorous faith. On the contrary, many of them do have such a faith. Nor is he saying that all evangelicals are strong in their faith and practice because here too there is internal variation. We are talking about statistical variation between groups, not presence or absence of anything.

Although Smith does not use Wuthnow's terminology, I think it would not be unfair to his interpretation to say that the weaker religious vitality of mainliners and liberals is due to the fact that their members are more likely to have loose connections, certainly to the church and their congregations. And even perhaps their denominations are more apt to be porous than in the case of fundamentalists and evangelicals. Last night I gave some very recent news that I had just learned the day before yesterday that my church, the Episcopal Church, does not seem to fall in this category. It has stronger loyalty and more vigorous faith than outside observers might have imagined, based on an ongoing study of the whole church. Thus the mainliners and liberals, though now probably a minority among Protestants, are closer to the norm for American society than are fundamentalist and evangelicals. One of the weaknesses of Smith's study is that Catholics are not compared systematically to the Protestant groups. My belief is that Catholics would show an even broader spectrum. They are by far the largest denomination and if you know anything about the Catholic Church you are going to find it all over the place in most of these dimensions of religious vitality. The Catholic Church is however growing more than any Protestant group. And that partly has to do with high birth rate and partly has to do with immigration.

In any case, Smith's findings with respect to mainliners and liberals would seem to fit the stereotype that is among Christians of these sorts that there has been the greatest compromise with the prevailing culture, though neither Smith nor I believe that this is the whole story. More interesting is Smith's explanation of the vitality of the evangelicals and the measurably lower vitality of the fundamentalists. In order to account for the religious vitality of the evangelicals, Smith developed what he calls "a subcultural identity theory of religious strength." To make his point, Smith comments on Peter Berger's metaphor of the sacred canopy, which by glancing briefly at this morning's earlier paper I see was discussed there in his well known 1967 book of that title. Berger's *Sacred Canopy* was the fabric of religious meaning that provided legitimacy to a whole society. But, Smith says, "Though America may have had something like a sacred canopy in the 19th century when there was a Protestant quasi-establishment, divisions within Protestantism were muted and Catholics were relatively few, what we have seen develop in the 20th century is rather," and this is an interesting new metaphor, "a series of sacred umbrellas, no one of which overarches the whole society." This is perhaps a dangerous metaphor, since umbrellas are usually held by individuals and there might be as many umbrellas as citizens. Sheila-ism gone rampant. But, Smith is using the term more loosely to imply that each major group has its own umbrella.

The key to evangelical strength, according to Smith, is a combination of distinctiveness from the envioning culture, that is a different umbrella or let us say clear group boundaries, combined with strong engagement with the envioning culture. To quote him directly, "The American evangelical movement has been relatively successful because it has managed to formulate and sustain a religious strategy that maintains both high tension with, and high integration into, mainstream American society simultaneously. Evangelical sensibilities allow neither complete disengagement from nor total assimilation into the dominant culture. This provokes a situation of

sustained dissidence, if not outright conflict between evangelical believers and the non-evangelical world which they, with tension, engage and this fosters religious vitality. By contrast, Smith sees mainstream and liberal Protestants as engaged with the culture, all right, but lacking a very strong sense of distinctness, which makes it all too easy for them to be absorbed into the dominant culture. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, have withdrawn into a, what he calls, "defensive separatism" and so have been tempted to isolation and disengagement, tendencies which can lead to apathy rather than to religious vitality.

Evangelicals then would seem to have it just right, or so you might think if you haven't read the last chapter of Smith's book. But before getting to Smith's critical perspective, let me put his findings into the perspective I have been developing about recent trends in American society. It would seem that evangelicals have been doing a good job of maintaining strong connections and firmly bounded religious institutions at a time when American society has been drifting toward loose connections and porosity. It would be nice to think that evangelicals have significantly lower divorce rates and greater continuity in their work lives than other Americans, but here, unfortunately, the data does not support that conclusion. In these significant areas, evangelicals are much like other Americans. That leads us to ask another question: How tightly bounded, after all, are evangelicals? The metaphor of porosity can have two somewhat different meanings. Leakage from the inside to the outside, and here it would seem evangelical boundaries are indeed firm and that for example they are less likely to lose their children to another faith tradition or to no religion than are mainliners, liberals or even fundamentalists. Though it is worth pointing out that most mainliners and liberals do hold on to their children. They have just been having fewer of them through most of the 20th century than have members of the conservative churches. Again, I discussed this demographic issue last night. But porosity can also mean letting things in. Here, I am afraid, no one does a very good job. We are all of us, of whatever persuasion, and certainly evangelicals included, inundated by all kinds of things we never wanted and don't know what to do with. I think with some poignancy of the decision of the Church of the Nazarene in 1952 not to forbid television watching for Nazarenes, a decision which led to a minor schism three years later. Who in 1952 could imagine what television would bring into our homes? But now it is not only newspapers, radio and television but junk mail, e-mail and the World Wide Web. Add to this the schools and the shopping malls and you will see that we are deluged with stuff that makes it very difficult to maintain cultural or religious distinctiveness. Strong connections and firm boundaries are in today's jargon high maintenance. They take a lot of time and energy; things that are in short supply among most Americans today, even evangelicals. To the extent that evangelicals are maintaining these strong connections and boundaries, as Smith says they are, they are to be commended. They are going against the stream and it is hard to do that.

Now it is time for Smith's last chapter. Strong as they are and committed as they are to the mission of engaging the culture and transforming the society in the direction of Christian values, their engagement is largely, Smith says, ineffective. Smith points out that the issues, and this is on the basis of a national survey and interviews in all parts of the country, the issues that evangelicals have chosen to confront American society with are primarily abortion, homosexuality and to a lesser extent, school prayer. But evangelicals cannot confront the fundamental tendencies that have been changing our society for decades because those tendencies stem from the way our institutions work, above all the market economy as it takes over ever more areas of our common life. In this regard, evangelicals are not distinctive. They

are thoroughly at one with the larger society when they embrace an individualism so pervasive that they cannot think and do not want to think about institutions, but account for everything in terms of individual actions and individual responsibility. This, of course, is the argument of the *Good Society*, about American culture generally, our allergy to dealing seriously with institutions. And in this regard, Smith rightly argues the similarity of the evangelicalism to the environing society is not because of assimilation or secularization, not because of that. Protestantism generally and the evangelical tradition in particular are the very source of our radical individualism and our inability to think about institutions.

Now I am not saying that fighting about abortion or homosexuality is a waste of time when it is a matter of conscience. But I am arguing that even if the evangelical position on these issues prevailed, it would not get at the source of our weak connections and our porous institutions. I heard a paper at Baylor University where I spoke last month that pointed out that attitudes towards abortion have not changed in 30 years. They are almost exactly where they were in the immediate years before *Row vs. Wade*. About 15% of us are pro-life in the radical sense of allowing no abortions. About 40% of us are pro-choice in the sense of having no restrictions and the rest of us are in between believing that some abortions are wrong and the state should intervene or believing that some abortions are wrong but the state should stay out of it. In any case, there is no sign that this stalemate will be broken soon for every major group, men and women, white and black, rich and poor, religious conservative or religious liberal are almost exactly where they were 30 years ago in spite of all that has been said on both sides for three decades.

On acceptance of gay relationships the evidence is different. For the past 30 years there has been an inexorable trend to greater acceptance and among all groups, including all religious groups. Opposition is still strong but declining. In 1970 90% of conservative Christians said sexual relations between members of the same sex are always wrong. By 1990 it was 75%. Among liberal Christians the numbers went from 80% in 1970 to 45% in 1990 and Catholics show the same decline. I don't want to get into the argument about these issues, but only to raise the question of whether focusing on them addresses the fundamental problems we face: the decline of public trust, the weakening of marriage, the insecurity of economic life, the weak connections and porous institutions that make life so difficult in our society. The fact that evangelicals even less that liberal Christians can face these issues is in part because they are implicated with them in their own heritage.

The two sides of John D. Rockefeller are the two sides of American Protestantism. We have created the most productive economy the world has ever seen and we are not very happy with the consequences. Again, the best and worst are closer together than we would ever like to imagine. Max Weber, the greatest sociologist and I think the greatest man who was a sociologist, saw clearly our problem at the end of his famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* written nearly a century ago, and I want to quote some of those great closing paragraphs. "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells into everyday life and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. In [the Puritan divine Richard] Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.' But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. Since asceticism undertook to remodel

the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as in no previous period in history. Today the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. ... No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideals and ideas, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self importance. For the last stage of this cultural development, it might truly be said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.'" That is the value-free Max Weber.

For those of us steeped in a tradition of revival and reform we do indeed hope for a rebirth of old ideals and ideas to meet new conditions. And I am not without hope that the resources for that rebirth are at hand, if we would only recognize them. The first step in recognizing that we are fundamentally in communion with God and the whole of God's creation would be to see how close our Protestant tradition comes, even at its moments of highest achievement, perhaps especially in its moments of highest achievement, to an isolating individualism. To those chilling words of an all too ordinary American, "The individual is the preeminent being in the universe. There is always a distinction between me and you. Community sharing cannot truly exist. What I have is mine and it is mine because I deserve it and I have a right to it." That, I think, is the knife to our throat. Until the Church can begin to confront that, then all the strength and all its vitality will not challenge the devastating tendencies that have overtaken our nation and our world.