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Economic Scholarship and Contemporary Religious Vitality

In this essay, I will discuss the need for a particular type of economic research on religion. Research in this area has seen exciting developments in recent years. Scholars in economics (as well as fields like sociology and political science) have used recently-developed empirical tools, and recently-created datasets, to answer long-standing questions and to pose new questions no one has thought to ask before. Those interested in learning about this recent work could start with a review by Syria Iyer (2017) and an older but still very worthwhile review by Laurence Iannaccone (1998). Those reviews make clear that it is an exciting time to be a quantitative social scientist working on questions related to religion.

But will it stay this way? It appears to me that we may be living through a sea-change era for religion. I wish that more people agreed with me about this and that more people did work trying to understand the causes and consequences of these changes.

The sea change I see is a decline in religious activity in the United States. Not everyone is interested in talking about, or acknowledging, that such a decline is occurring. I can understand why. First, when your career depends upon getting (often secular) scholars to pay attention to your work on religion, your first worry might be convincing your audience that religion matters. Talking about religion’s steep decline is an awkward way to get that conversation going. Second, my own (unscien-

tific) impression is that some people who work in this area would consider religion's decline to be bad news, and rather than study bad news with no obvious solution, it might seem more worthwhile to study some other aspect of religion, or to try to rationalize the decline as something else.

I am sympathetic to these concerns. Given the state of the profession, I do not recommend this area as a main avocation for young economists needing tenure, and I take no pleasure in being a prophet of doom. But ignoring this phenomenon will not make it go away. Even since some early signs of rising secularization (such as the large increase in those reporting no religious affiliation in surveys in the 1990s), more evidence has accumulated. Certainly, the role of the nonaffiliated has not gone away. A recent report showed that, for the first time in history, the unaffiliated make up largest group of American voters, with more “adherents” than any other religious tradition (Ingram, 2016).

But there are other ways to illustrate this change, such as in Figure 1, which shows the fraction of people in the General Social Survey who report never attending religious services from 2000 on—well after the rise of the nonaffiliated began. This figure shows that even in the last decade there have been changes in religious practice. The changes are big. About one fourth of people now say they *never* attend religious services—not even once a year or less than once a year (which are both options people can choose in this survey). Indeed, some recent scholarship has suggested that the longstanding idea of American Exceptionalism—the endurance of faith in America even as it declined in other developed countries—may be coming to an end (Voas & Chaves, 2016).

Another argument one used to hear (not so much anymore) is that this decline is a mainline protestant thing, or perhaps an organized religion thing. Figure 2 here plots the fraction of people who say they never pray. Again, the figure shows a very large—and very recent—increase. These figures and this evidence are not cherry picked. Today, when one looks at the future of spirituality, most arrows point downwards.

Is this the end (or at least the beginning of the end) for faith in America? I do not think anyone knows. As Niels Bohr is often credited with saying, “prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.” I do not think Figures 1 and 2 necessarily predict a long irreversible decline for faith in America or other developed countries. But I would invite other economically-minded scholars to think hard about it. The rapidly changing role of religion in America (and other nations) could have enormous

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consequences. We need scholarship to help us understand the forces driving this change and whether there is anything that could be done to affect this change.

Most recent economic work on religiosity focuses on historic institutions, or the role of religion in developing societies. These are fantastically interesting areas of work. I always enjoy seeing exciting new work in these areas. I am not trying to put down anyone else's research agenda. But, may I ask, where are the scholars who want to discuss the large changes in religion that are happening right now? In particular, where are the economists?

This is a topic for economists. I typically shun the use of market metaphors to describe religion. But undoubtedly religious groups face limited resources, and as those resources become more limited, they will force groups to make some tough decisions. These are decisions that are inherently economic.

Here are a few examples of what I am thinking about:

As the number of adherents shrinks, I think many religious groups have become less antagonistic towards each other and more willing to work together to combat secularism. (Hungerman, 2011, provides some evidence of this.) Will this trend continue if secularization continues?

Here is another example: A number of studies have shown that high levels of educational attainment may lead to lower religion. If we reach a plateau in educational attainment, will this slow the growth of secularization?

Or this: In the past decade the US government (and some other countries as well) has begun to subsidize religious education. I and my coauthors Kevin Rinz and Jay Frymark have shown that, in some communities in the United States, churches running voucher-accepting schools now get more money from vouchers—that is, the government—than anywhere else. If I had predicted this twenty years ago, you would have said I was crazy. As congregations face fewer and fewer donors, will the availability of funds through vouchers or other venues lead to a reorganization of the religious landscape?

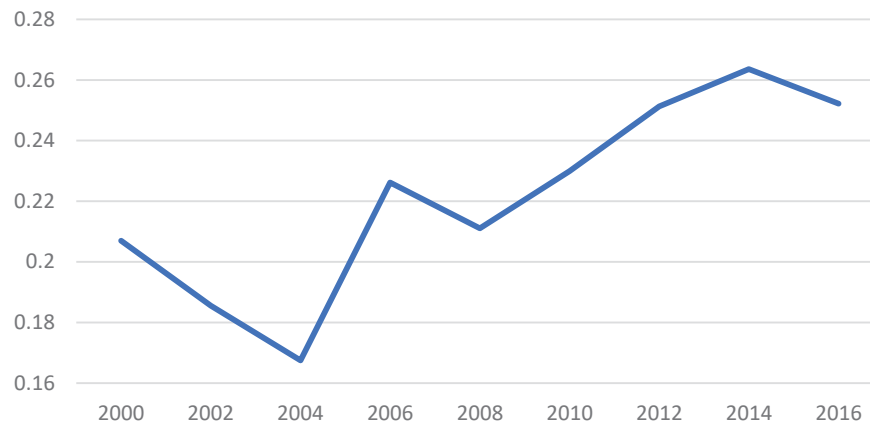
I give these questions as examples of issues for which I think economists have the right tools for doing good work. Many scholars much more famous than I have predicted a coming secularization. But today it is not so much a matter of prediction as it is documentation—we are living in a long-foretold moment in which these changes are beginning to

occur. The time for scholarship on the fate of modern religion in the US and other developed societies is now.

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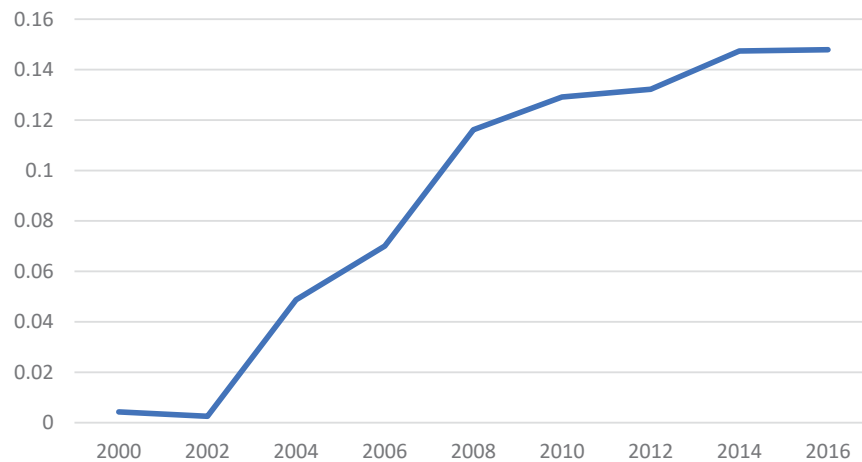
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Figure 1
Fraction of Americans Never Attending Religious Services



Source: General Social Survey

Figure 2
Fraction of Americans Who Never Pray



Source: General Social Survey



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On Being a Visible Christian Economist

My identity as a “Christian scholar” or “Christian professor” has enjoyed significant affirmation over the years, through both institutions and individuals who have invested in me and for which I am incredibly grateful. I had opportunities as an undergraduate at Calvin College (advised by Kurt Schaefer) and as a participant in the Pew Younger Scholars program (under Dave Richardson) to have frequent interactions with Christian professors who affirmed my academic pursuits from the beginning. The notion of glorifying God through research and teaching was brought home to me early and often, and while there are always those times of feeling my activities are too far removed from practical “gospel work,” I can always pick up my copy of *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* and remember why I do what I do. I highly