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# DISRUPTIVE INNOVATIONS AND THE DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION OF RELIGION

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## Abstract

While belief in God is prevalent among Americans and interest in religion and spirituality remains robust, signs indicate a significant shift away from engagement with institutional religion. This paper seeks to interpret this cultural change in the American religious climate through the lens of Clayton Christensen's research on disruptive innovations, which offers provocative parallels for religious organizations and their leaders. Due to their captivity to existing audiences, established faith communities might need to deemphasize or modify some of the very assumptions and behaviors that brought them previous vitality in order to connect with disaffiliated neighbors. This may involve improvising simpler, less expensive, more accessible expressions of their religious traditions and practices that address people's search for identity, meaning, and belonging.

## The Great Disintegration

For half a century, observers of American religion have traced patterns of change and decline in participation and affiliation in congregational life. Religious affiliation and participation tend to reflect generational patterns. Most people become somewhat more religiously observant as they form a family and have children, as well as toward the end of life.<sup>1</sup> What is normal to them tends to be what they grew up with—the religious identity and practice of their family of origin—even if they come to reject it. The past fifty years have brought significant shifts in this generational cycle and the foundation that it provides for shaping religious identity in American life.

The post-World War II boom of the 1950s and early 1960s represented something of a high-water mark for

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 72.

American institutional religion, driven by returning GIs and their families. Significant numbers of American congregations were founded or expanded during this period, particularly in the burgeoning suburbs. These often took the form of denominational franchise congregations organized around relatively standardized expressions of worship and programming in dedicated buildings with professional clergy and staff. During a time when institutional trust and affiliation were strong in American life, belonging to a congregation or a denomination was a mark of family or ethnic identity, respectability, and community citizenship, as well as spiritual aspiration. Even amidst America's free religious marketplace, denominational and congregational affiliations were more often inherited than matters of individual choice.

Many congregations in America embraced a programmatic paradigm of ministry in this post-War period and the decades that followed. The shared ethic of duty, obligation, and service that characterized the World War II generation expressed itself through the formation of expanded committees, ministries, and programs run and engaged by volunteers. Voluntary tithes and a strong sense of institutional loyalty underpinned the financial model for congregational life. High congregational engagement often meant volunteering for a committee, not just participating in the rituals and practices of the faith.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, this pattern began to erode precipitously as baby boomers left the church in droves. The cultural upheavals of the 1960s spawned the rejection of traditional institutional structures and patterns in the name of spiritual seeking, New Age, eastern religions and various alternatives. Not long after, a conservative backlash brought waves of growth to evangelical congregations. As mainline Protestant denominations saw their membership fall, Southern Baptist and nondenominational membership surged in the 1970s and 80s.

That growth trajectory has now ended, and the trends of decline span across denominations.<sup>2</sup> Generational cycles are now playing out differently than they have in the past. This is driven by the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, from about five to seven percent in the pre-boomer generations who reached adulthood before 1960 to twenty-three percent of American adults today and a full third of those under age thirty.<sup>3</sup> Whereas earlier generations were formed by participation in religious communities in their childhood, that is now increasingly less likely.

Moreover, if marriage and having children correlate with an increase in religious participation, younger generations today are taking those steps much later, if at all. Robert Wuthnow describes this trend as “coming of age at forty.” With longer life expectancies, developmental tasks such as leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having a child are taking much longer, even as marriage rates are declining.<sup>4</sup>

Mark Chaves summarizes this trend toward disaffiliation by using the metaphor of climate change:

The evidence for a decades-long decline in American religiosity is now incontrovertible—like the evidence for global warming, it comes from multiple sources, shows up in several dimensions, and paints a consistent factual picture—the burden of proof has

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<sup>2</sup> Mormons and certain Pentecostal denominations are the exception. Roman Catholic membership has been sustained largely through Latino/a immigration, though it too is declining. See *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 123. See also Pew Forum, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 9–12.

shifted to those who want to claim that American religiosity is not declining.<sup>5</sup>

While weather conditions in particular American contexts may be variable toward religiosity (some more favorable than others), the general climate is increasingly averse. Diana Butler Bass pronounces this “the end of religion,” meaning the disintegration of organized, systematized, institutional expressions of faith: “People intuit that the modern conceptualization of religion as an ideology or institution is bankrupt and has already, in some significant ways, failed.”<sup>6</sup> Even as more Americans claim to be religious and spiritual, they are shifting from external institutional affiliations and identities to a new focus on experience, belief, and practice increasingly likely to unfold outside and apart from organized faith communities.

### *Probing Deeper*

How can we understand this shift? The secularization theses that emerged in the 1960s and assumed that with greater economic development, religion would decline in the West and around the rest of the globe have been proven wrong. Religious faith remains a powerful force, even as the center of gravity for Christianity has shifted to the Global South. Indeed, a vast majority of Americans profess belief in God. Atheists and agnostics make up only a small minority of the population.<sup>7</sup> Even two thirds of the religiously unaffiliated believe in God, though eighty-eight percent of

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Chaves, “The Decline of American Religion?” ARDA Guiding Paper Series (State College, Penn.: Association of Religion Data Archives at The Pennsylvania State University, 2011), [www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers.asp](http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers.asp), accessed September 13, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012), 98.

<sup>7</sup> The ARDA Religion Database puts this number at fourteen percent combined; the Pew Forum puts it at seven percent. See [http://thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_234\\_2.asp](http://thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_234_2.asp), accessed March 10, 2015, and Pew Forum, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

them have no interest in joining a religious organization.<sup>8</sup> What seems to be taking place in the United States is not a widespread rejection of God or religious faith per se, but rather a more complex generational shift away from religious participation, belonging, and affiliation, particularly with respect to established religious organizations.

In order to understand this shift, we must examine more deeply some of the emerging cultural trends that are determining how identity, meaning, and community are formed in contemporary American life. One of the most basic underlying factors is the individualistic trajectory of late modern culture. Charles Taylor describes how in western culture, the pre-modern view of human purpose was defined in large part by a sense of dependence and demand upon worshipping and serving God. In this view, God is at the center of the universe, not humans. Western understandings began to shift at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries toward the idea that what we owe God is essentially the achievement of our own good, which can be discerned from nature.<sup>9</sup> The upside of this change was an ethic of universal morality that stressed human rights and serving the neighbor. However, beginning in the Romantic era and then spreading more widely in the second half of the twentieth century, this anthropocentric turn fostered a culture of expressive individualism or “authenticity” in which people are expected or encouraged to discover their own fulfillment and do their own thing.<sup>10</sup>

The outcome, according to Taylor, is a “nova effect” of spiritual possibilities and choices, all ordered around the individual quest for self-actualization and fulfillment. There is little need to commit deeply to one tradition, community, or practice for long, particularly if it seems not to be helping one on that quest. Religion becomes instrumental to self-

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<sup>8</sup> Pew Forum, “Nones on the Rise: One in Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2012), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 221–23.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, 299.

fulfillment and unmoored from deeper communal and familial structures as spirituality is no longer intrinsically related to society.<sup>11</sup> The integration of doctrine, tradition, communal practice, and institutional belonging fray, to the point where the “tight normative link between a certain religious identity, the belief in certain theological propositions, and standard practice, no longer holds for great numbers of people.”<sup>12</sup>

Miroslav Volf carries this argument further, suggesting that human flourishing in the contemporary West has been reduced for many people to “experiential satisfaction.” The ethical universalism that emerged in the eighteenth century and replaced God with human solidarity and moral obligation to the neighbor is now being eclipsed with a sense, for many at least, that the point of human life is to string together a series of satisfying experiences for the individual self.<sup>13</sup> In this framework, even God becomes simply a means for self-gratification.

Research on the functional beliefs of American adults and youth bears out the reduction of religion to moralism and the priority on individual self-expression. Nancy Ammerman’s recent study of the spiritual lives of a cross-section of American adults discovered the lingering predominance of what she calls “ethical spirituality” or “Golden-Rule Christianity”: Nearly everyone agrees that the primary point of religion and spirituality is to help individuals to be “good” people, meaning treating their neighbors fairly and serving others.<sup>14</sup> What is striking, however, is that the religiously disaffiliated say the same thing, and in fact religiously active people were no more socially engaged in serving their neighbors than the

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, 490.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, 514.

<sup>13</sup> Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2011), 59–60.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45.

religiously unaffiliated.<sup>15</sup> Religion is understood primarily as a force to make people good, but it is also seen as unnecessary to that end.

The National Study of Youth and Religion, which delved deeply into the spiritual lives of American teenagers and young adults, found a similar consensus. Religion is perceived by most to be a benign force in people's lives, particularly as it offers a moral foundation and inspiration for helping other people. Yet the picture that emerges is one of general inconsequence. Religion is a nice thing, like an extra-curricular activity, that operates in the background of most teenagers' lives. It doesn't ask much, nor does it make much difference in return.<sup>16</sup>

Most youth in the study were highly inarticulate about their religious beliefs. What they did offer was what the researchers call "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," a kind of predominant theology that spans self-identified Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and even Hindu and Buddhist youth. Christian Smith notes that "for many U.S. teenagers, God is treated something like a cosmic therapist or counselor, a ready and competent helper who responds in times of trouble but who does not particularly ask for devotion or obedience."<sup>17</sup> God's purpose is to make individuals feel better about themselves, to make them better people, and to solve problems that arise. Like ethical spirituality, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism serves as a lowest-common-denominator faith that covers over religious and cultural differences in a pluralist America where tolerance is seen as an ultimate value.<sup>18</sup>

Among these young adults, thoroughgoing individualism is an uncontested orthodoxy, as is relativism.<sup>19</sup> Christian

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<sup>15</sup> Ammerman, 214, 229.

<sup>16</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6–17.

<sup>17</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 148, 62–63.

<sup>18</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 30–31.

<sup>19</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 143.

Smith and Patricia Snell observe that “among emerging adults, religious beliefs do not seem to be important, action-driving commitments, but rather mental assents to ideas that have few obvious consequences.”<sup>20</sup> What serves as the primary ordering force in young adults’ lives is their own feelings and inclinations; it is up to them to pick and choose from religion to serve their own felt needs. Yet such choices are also complicated by the predominance of relativism; every option seems equally valid and true, so committing to one is very difficult.

Such relativism renders religious affiliation, participation, and engagement inherently fluid and discourages institutional commitment. Smith and Snell write:

Most [young adults] are at pains to keep open as many options as possible, to honor all forms of social and cultural diversity without judgment or even evaluation, and as quickly as possible to get on the road to autonomous self-sufficiency. Little of that encourages them to put down roots within particular religious communities that engage in committed faith practices. And that reluctance is reinforced by the postponement of family formation and childbearing, both of which tend to encourage religious investment. What is good and bad also seem to most emerging adults to be self-evident—it seems that no particular history or people or heritage or revelation or tradition are needed to navigate moral choices.<sup>21</sup>

Wuthnow uses the term *tinkering* to describe young adults’ approach to religion and spirituality, as well as life generally: the cobbling together of an individually crafted sense of identity, meaning, and purpose out of whatever resources, stories, traditions, and practices are at hand in the face of

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<sup>20</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 286.

<sup>21</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 280.



widespread uncertainty.<sup>22</sup> No pressing reason is evident for these elements to cohere with one another or be grounded in the life and practice of traditional religious organizations.

When religion has largely been reduced to what these researchers describe, it should be no surprise that formal religious organizations are increasingly regarded as unnecessary or irrelevant. A paradox can be seen here, as N. Jay Demerath provocatively argued two decades ago.<sup>23</sup> As liberal values of individualism, pluralism, tolerance, emancipation, free critical inquiry, and the authority of human experience have come to permeate American culture, the religious organizations that fostered those values (such as liberal Protestant or Reform Jewish congregations) have declined. Liberalism's cultural triumph on the macro level has caused it to suffer on the micro level because its very values undercut the need to belong to an organized religious community in the first place.

For conservative religious communities, the cultural trends toward expressive individualism serve as a powerful headwind to forming traditional religious identity and practice. American evangelicalism's embrace of individual experience (particularly through a focus on emotional intimacy with God) has helped it, but the generational disintegration of religious affiliation presents massive challenges to conservative churches as well. Smith and Snell note that if the best thing about religion is that it helps people to be good and behave well, the point of raising children in the church is to teach them the basics of morality. However, once they learn that, it is time to "graduate" from church and move on.<sup>24</sup> Thus, confirmation in many congregations functions as a kind of graduation or exit rite, with the hope that young adults will return when

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<sup>22</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> N. J. Demerath, "Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34(4) (1995).

<sup>24</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 286.

they get married and have kids, which is being postponed indefinitely for many.

*Searching for Meaning in an Age of Fragmented Community*

Other cultural currents are at work as well. Mark Dunkelman traces the decline of community connections in American society within the middle ring of social ties, traditionally the village, township, or neighborhood, where voluntary organizations like congregations exist. People spend more time with intimates (such as immediate family or close friends) and now also connect through social media with an outer ring of loose ties around specific affiliations or interests.<sup>25</sup> Faith in institutions is declining along with the voluntary organizations that fostered middle ring ties, such as Rotary, Elks, Junior League, Kiwanis, and local congregations.

Millennials and other digital natives are moving away from membership and participation in hierarchically structured organizations and toward fluid movements that coalesce through social media platforms and then disband.<sup>26</sup> Social service organizations that once functioned primarily through volunteers and then shifted to professional staff now find themselves negotiating a crowdfunding paradigm where individual free agents outside organizations rise up and mobilize people to support the cause.<sup>27</sup> Norms and expectations around institutional involvement and ownership are rapidly shifting, as is the authority granted to clergy and other traditional figures.

Amidst all these cultural shifts, the driving questions that foster religious and spiritual engagement are changing. As inherited structures for identity, meaning, and belonging disintegrate, people face the task of self-authoring their own

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<sup>25</sup> Marc J. Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> See Hayim Herring, *Tomorrow's Synagogue Today: Creating Vibrant Centers of Jewish Life* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Beth Kanter and Allison H. Fine, *The Networked Nonprofit: Connecting with Social Media to Drive Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

stories, of constructing their own identity through an endless series of choices, and of forming community amidst deep uncertainty. Questions of identity (Who am I?), meaning or purpose (What am I here for?) and community (Where do I belong?) are paramount. The emerging cultural environment poses significant challenges for established religious communities that were organized for different eras and focused on different questions.

### **Established Firms and Disruptive Innovations**

The research of Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen on disruptive innovations offers a provocative lens for interpreting this disintegration of established structures in American religious life. Christensen's research focuses on what happens when upstart firms enter a market dominated by established firms that offer relatively expensive, complex solutions to established audiences.<sup>28</sup> The disruptors don't try to compete initially with the established firms by matching their products or services with equally expensive and complicated offerings. Instead, through attending to audiences neglected by established firms, they offer simpler, inexpensive solutions that established firms wouldn't consider providing. Over time, these disruptors tend to take over the market, undercutting the established firms.

Christensen initially studied disk drives, which were invented by IBM in the 1950s and sold for decades to high-end customers for use in elaborate applications. IBM was highly innovative in pioneering the market and incrementally improving their disk drives. But by the 1980s, competitors emerged who made cheap, relatively simple disk drives for use in applications that IBM never considered or was unwilling to embrace because the profit margins were lower. Within a couple of decades, these competitors had disrupted the disk drive market, eventually forcing IBM out. The same

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<sup>28</sup> Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2011). First published in 1997.

thing has happened in various other industries, such as steel and mechanical excavators.<sup>29</sup>

Established firms become established because of past success; they thrive because they are able to connect with and serve particular audiences. The organizational life of an established firm becomes shaped around the purpose of sustaining this success by offering gradual improvements to these established customers. The primary incentives lie in catering to the needs of existing audiences. Less incentive exists to depart from these known patterns in order to attend to audiences that are not already part of the firm's customer base. Doing so involves various kinds of risk that established firms naturally seek to avoid. They have a good thing going and see little reason to jeopardize it. The innovation undertaken by established firms is *sustaining innovation*—the evolution and improvement of existing products or services according to the expectations of mainstream audiences, often but not always in continuity with the past.<sup>30</sup>

However, it is precisely when they have achieved success that established firms become vulnerable to disruptors. Disruptors work with differing assumptions than established firms. Their primary audiences are those that have been neglected by established firms. Rather than compete on the same terms, they innovate downmarket solutions that are typically less expensive and elaborate. Disruptive innovators are closely linked to the needs of audiences that the established firms aren't listening to. Disruptive innovations are often *worse* in performance, at least initially, than sustaining innovations. Yet because their innovations are simpler and less expensive, they are more accessible, and thus they begin to undercut the established firms' market share. Think for a moment about personal computing replacing mainframes, and mobile devices replacing personal computers.

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<sup>29</sup> Christensen, 89–110.

<sup>30</sup> Christensen, xvii–xviii.

Disruptive organizations tend to embody an alternative culture to established firms. They are leaner and more agile, less focused on execution and more on learning. Unlike an established firm that is organized around maintaining past success for its captive audience, disruptors are typically freer to try small experiments in order to connect with new audiences. The kinds of failures necessary for these experiments are embraced in ways that established firms find difficult to contemplate.

Christensen describes a paradox at the heart of this process: the “innovator’s dilemma.” *It is precisely the very behaviors that brought the established firm success that make it difficult to embrace the downward mobility necessary to connect with new audiences.*<sup>31</sup> Because established firms tend to be captive to their existing customers, they have little imagination, capacity, or organizational freedom to listen to those not currently part of their customer base and to experiment with the kinds of simple solutions that would allow them to serve those new customers. The very practices required to sustain the established firm prevent those firms from adapting and eventually lead to their demise. Christensen describes this as “good management,” taking care of established customers and sustaining the innovations upon which the firm originally found success. Paradoxically, good management leads to failure.<sup>32</sup> What is needed is a different set of organizational and leadership behaviors, which we will explore further below.

### *Established Firms in American Religious Life*

What might this research mean for religious life and leadership in America today? Christensen’s theory is based on technological innovation in business environments; he makes no claims about religious organizations.<sup>33</sup> Yet the

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<sup>31</sup> Christensen, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Christensen, xxiv.

<sup>33</sup> Christensen has, however, examined higher education in light of his theory of disruptive innovations. See Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring,

organizational behaviors he describes offer a provocative lens for interpreting the transformation currently taking place in American religion. In many ways, established religious organizations are behaving like the established firms in Christensen's research. They are the product of past success, offering relatively elaborate and expensive offerings to the existing audiences who find them meaningful. This can take the form of traditional expressions of congregational life or of contemporary mega churches that seek to provide cradle-to-grave programming. Both tend to assume a highly institutionalized, professionalized paradigm for ministry, a significant formal organizational structure based on volunteerism and membership, and an expensive economic model to sustain staffing and dedicated buildings.

The predominant shape of contemporary American religious life, organized around local congregations connected to regional judicatories and denominations, emerged out of earlier moments in American history. It carried over from Europe the legacy of the established churches of the Christendom era, which assumed Christianity was normative in society and fostered a strongly institutionalized form of religious life. This was altered in America with the voluntary principle of congregational affiliation amidst religious pluralism. Yet for much of American history the culture privileged and supported membership and participation in these religious organizations. Judicatories and denominations, together with seminaries and divinity schools, supported and linked congregations, which in turn provided the resources to sustain them. Much of this structure assumes the normative value of formal institutional affiliation, membership, and trust.

It is important to stress that this system evolved because it *worked*—like established firms, established churches, synagogues, denominations, and theological schools met the religious needs of mainstream society for generations. In the

first half of the twentieth century in particular, they reaped the benefits of a culture that affirmed religious affiliation and institutional involvement. Their organizational life was largely focused on improving and adapting their offerings in faithfulness to tradition but within the norms of a culture that largely supported organized religious life.

Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk describe this paradigm as the “performative zone” of organizational life, when congregations are attuned to a relatively stable, predictable environment.<sup>34</sup> Growth happens largely through people switching congregations rather than connecting with unaffiliated people in the context. Congregations are organized around clear, well-established structures and roles. Rather than the fluid, networked structures of an emergent organization, performative zone congregations are hierarchical and formal. Professionalization dominates the approach to leadership. Communication and planning are formalized and centralized through official channels.

Leaders in this paradigm are predominantly managers responsible for sustaining the established life of the congregation. They are hired by and accountable to a captive audience of existing members who expect them to maintain inherited structures and patterns of congregational life. For religious organizations, this makes a lot of sense. Passing on tradition is central to their DNA and mission. Often, the expectation is that leaders will bring a galvanizing vision that will catalyze growth in the face of institutional decline, though this growth must not require significant renegotiation of the congregation’s established culture or it will be resisted. That culture is tailored around meeting the spiritual and religious needs of those who are already part of the congregation. In many American congregations today, those established members are older and less diverse than the surrounding neighborhood.

Many clergy and other congregational staff thus find themselves consumed today by meeting the needs of existing

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<sup>34</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 45–48.

members, often with fewer resources than in previous decades. Their work is often predominantly administrative and managerial in nature as they seek to sustain a programmatic form of ministry and congregational life that is increasingly at odds with trends in the larger culture. The older generations are the ones who donate the majority of funds that support the church (and leaders' salaries), and they typically dominate the expectations for congregational life. While there is sometimes strong rhetoric about evangelism or other efforts to recruit new members, the assumption is typically that newcomers would be incorporated into the congregation's established life rather than disrupt or transform it.

In other words, leaders of established faith communities are caught in the innovator's dilemma, in which the "good management" they are attempting (such as launching a new program, tweaking worship, redesigning the Web site, or starting a new ministry initiative) detracts from their ability to address the larger changes underway in the environment. Because they are largely listening to those who are already part of their life, established congregations tend to be disconnected relationally from neighbors who are unaffiliated with a faith community. They are not in the habit of listening to those neighbors and attempting the small experiments that would offer the possibility of forming religious community with them.

### *Disruptive Innovations in American Religious Life*

So who are the disruptive innovators in contemporary American religious life? Unlike some of Christensen's examples of emergent firms that challenged large companies like IBM or U.S. Steel from below, the religious context is more diffuse and complicated. In part, this is because the primary need has shifted from *belonging to a religious organization* to *finding meaning, identity, and purpose*. Whereas congregations often operate with the assumption that people are looking for a faith community to join, that is not the presenting reality for increasing numbers of Americans today. They are focused on an individual quest for meaning,



purpose, and community—one that wouldn't necessarily involve formal affiliation with or participation in an institution.

A variety of organizations and sources offer simpler, cheaper paths to meaning and purpose than established faith communities. Televangelists and self-help writers like Joel Osteen are one example; listening to Osteen's show for a half hour on Sunday mornings is a lot easier than joining a congregation. Trying yoga, Zen meditation, or various spiritual practices from the world's religions—most readily accessible in American communities in some form—offers the promise of spiritual fulfillment. Attending worship in a congregation on occasion (or even regularly) might be part of one's chosen approach, but this need not lead to joining. TED talks have taken the place of sermons for many Americans. They are accessible from anywhere, inspiring, and practical.

In addition to these options, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and other faith communities are innovating forms of religious expression and participation that do not assume the institutional shape of established congregations. These might be house churches, missional communities, prayer groups, Torah study groups, meditation groups, service teams, and all sorts of alternative expressions of religious community that are less expensive and simpler than typical congregations. The fact that they don't offer as many programs and ministries can be part of their lure; they often are focused on a few practices or experiences. Accordingly, they can be far more flexible, efficient, and accessible to outsiders who simply do not connect with the established shape of congregational life.

### **The Response: Confronting the Innovator's Dilemma<sup>35</sup>**

The innovator's dilemma refers to the challenge of sustaining an established organization while simultaneously

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<sup>35</sup> For a deeper discussion of these questions, see Dwight Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014).

seeking to connect with new audiences and experiment with simpler, less expensive solutions to those audiences' needs. Good management, in terms of logical, competent decision making and planning, is inadequate.<sup>36</sup> Established firms tend to be organized for sustaining innovations, not disruptive ones, for performative zone work rather than emergent work. Or, as Vijay Govindarajan and Chris Trimble observe, organizations are typically designed for ongoing operations, not innovation.<sup>37</sup>

A common impulse among leaders of established firms when faced with disruptive innovations is to work harder and plan smarter, but this is not helpful when it comes to addressing disruptive innovations because it denies the evidence about the nature of those disruptions.<sup>38</sup> Established firms assume they already have the knowledge and expertise about what will work and need only apply it in new situations. However, the nature of disruptive innovations is that organizations genuinely don't know what will connect with new audiences. They have to experiment their way into new knowledge through trial and error in relationship with those audiences.

Failure is an integral part of this process, as it is with learning and innovation generally. The common Silicon Valley mantra, "Fail early to succeed sooner," captures this ethos.<sup>39</sup> There is simply no way to discover what will work other than through repeated tries, most of which will not succeed. It is best for these failures to be small and inexpensive.

Learning from disruptive innovators points to a new set of habits, behaviors, and imagination for religious organizations and their leaders. Addressing disruptive innovation involves a revolution in how leaders and

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<sup>36</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, xvi.

<sup>37</sup> Vijay Govindarajan and Chris Trimble, *The Other Side of Innovation: Solving the Execution Challenge* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>38</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 178.

<sup>39</sup> Tim Brown, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Business, 2009), 17.

organization members interpret reality and engage the surrounding environment. Rather than being established experts dispensing answers, programs, and resources, faith communities must become learners in relationship with their neighbors. Such learning is, of course, a deeply traditional thing. A disciple is, after all, a student or an apprentice. Listening must replace speaking as the primary posture, at least initially and for long enough to develop the credibility to be heard.

### *Practicing Innovation*

Religious communities might embrace four key practices of innovation in addressing the innovator's dilemma. The first is *close listening to neighbors*. Rather than attend predominantly to those already in their congregation, faith communities must find ways to form relationships and listen to the stories, hopes, struggles, and dreams of those who are not part of the congregation. Out of this listening come iterative small experiments, or repeated attempts to connect the faith community's practices and traditions with the realities of these neighbors. Third is a *high tolerance for failure*. Most of the experiments will fail, but there is no way forward without them. This requires resilience and the courage to keep trying. Finally comes the embrace of *improvisation*, literally not seeing ahead. Unlike the established mode of careful plans and multiyear strategies, in the world of disruptive innovations, we don't know quite where we will end up.

Religious communities might fruitfully learn practices and habits from some of the world's most innovative organizations in Silicon Valley in order to help them do this work. One is *design thinking*, a process by which innovators work with neighbors or audiences to define a problem or a challenge. Through careful observation of people who are experiencing the problem or challenge, they learn more deeply about it. Out of this "deep dive" into the realities of those neighbors, the next step involves iterative prototyping of solutions. These solutions are then refined into a finished product or process, which will be subject to ongoing

modification when in use.<sup>40</sup> Design thinking unfolds through close attentiveness to the realities of neighbors and a playful process of improvisation in order to help neighbors with their challenges.

Another vital approach is *lean startup methodology*.<sup>41</sup> Silicon Valley is famous for the innumerable startup companies that it fosters. The traditional way of starting a new company through a long and expensive process of development that assumes the developers know what the final product or service should be often leads to big and costly failures. Practitioners of lean startup methodology take a different approach. They begin with ideas for a solution to people's needs, but they don't build polished versions of their solutions initially. Instead, they identify initial audiences with whom they can test provisional prototypes. Through ongoing listening to these audiences, they learn what the product or service should, in fact, become. Because the initial investment is relatively inexpensive, it is easy to pivot in new directions.

The era when denominations could invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in a new church start that was designed to yield a new franchise congregation after a few years is coming to a close. Lean startup methodology offers an alternative path forward. By forming relationships with an initial group of neighbors and testing small (and inexpensive) expressions of faith practice and community, those neighbors can teach the church planters what the ministry is called to become as they discern together God's leading.

These approaches reflect the commitments of *agile project management*.<sup>42</sup> Traditional methods for software or product development operate in a centrally planned and sequential manner, where the components are predetermined and completed in order. That is increasingly unworkable in

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<sup>40</sup> See Brown, *Change by Design*, for a fuller description of the design thinking process.

<sup>41</sup> Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Karen R. J. White, *Agile Project Management: A Mandate for the 21st Century* (Glen Mills, Penn.: Center for Business Practices, 2009).

today's fluid world, where changing customer needs require continuous adaptation. The agile approach allows for significant modification along the way through learning loops, intensive collaboration, regular practices of debriefing (called *retrospectives*), and the flexibility to improvise throughout the project. Project team members at all levels are empowered to engage in continuous learning in relationship with the customer. Agile is not just a project methodology, but rather a deeper shift in organizational culture and ethos.

An agile approach to religious community and practice would include regular listening to participants and outsiders and the freedom to modify and adapt in response to what is learned. Rather than leaders mapping out a clear destination and trying to manage people toward it, agile continually tests assumptions and changes course as necessary. This involves leaders taking the risk of learning what is in fact going on with participants and surrendering control over outcomes. It requires skills in asking questions and creating safe spaces for people to share their wonderings, doubts, struggles, and hopes.

### *Traditioned Innovation*

For many faith communities, the thought of introducing some of these approaches from innovative secular organizations presents an apparent contradiction. Most religious organizations are oriented around faithfulness to tradition rather than innovation. Doesn't embracing innovation, especially disruptive innovation, constitute a betrayal of tradition, and thus a departure from the organization's core identity and mission? I would like to argue that this is not the case. If you go back far enough, innovation is profoundly traditional for religious communities. It is how they have survived and adapted over the centuries in diverse contexts.

One need only read the Bible to see ample evidence for this. Creation itself is an innovation—God bringing forth something new from nothing. In response to human mistrust, betrayal, and breaking of relationships, God calls

people (Abraham and Sarah initially, then others) into the adventure of God's work of forming and restoring community. Israel goes through massive adaptations in its history, from the liberation of the Exodus, which brings the challenge of learning what it means to be a covenant people in the wilderness, to the development of the monarchy. During the Exile, the established patterns of Israel's religious and community life are profoundly disrupted, leading to powerful new interpretations and expressions of identity and practice, including the development of significant portions of the Bible.

For Christians, Jesus is the definitive innovator of human life—the incarnate one in whom humanity is reborn and renewed. Christianity is itself a movement of innovation within first-century Palestinian Judaism that spawns major ongoing innovation in the New Testament period as the gospel is translated in mission to the Gentiles. The Acts of the Apostles is a book full of adaptation and improvisation that unfolds through close listening to God (the leading of the Holy Spirit) and neighbors (think, for instance, of Paul's teaching on the Areopagus in Athens in Acts 17).

Historically, the shape of congregational life has evolved and adapted in the varying circumstances in which the church finds itself. This has happened in dialogue with the demands of changing cultural contexts and with the tradition. It is vital to distinguish today the traditions of the faith(s) from the particular organizational expressions that became normative in twentieth-century American life. If the denominational franchise congregation, for instance, is failing to connect with increasing numbers of people in American life today, that doesn't mean the tradition itself is failing. It means the tradition must be reclaimed and reinterpreted in new organizational forms.

Observers of organizations since Max Weber know that without institutionalization, movements tend not to last.<sup>43</sup> Christianity, Judaism, and other faith traditions will have an

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<sup>43</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press, [1947] 1997).

institutional future in American life if they are to survive. Those who deny the institutional character of the church tend either to celebrate uncritically the expressive individualism of late modernity or to promulgate romantic notions of primitive community that negate the faithfulness of established congregational life. Most likely, religious communities will be leaner, more participatory, less bureaucratic, less expensive to sustain, and focused on core shared practices. However, no one really knows yet the future shapes of religious organizations in America; they must be innovated and discovered.

The challenge for many congregations is that they have experienced their tradition only in its present organizational expression and lack imagination for faithful alternatives. Yet within the history of every congregation and faith community lie elements of a usable past—moments when the community's life and practice looked different. Identifying and claiming those moments is vital, even as the present expressions may vary significantly.

This involves the work of translation, which is a core element of the DNA of many faith traditions. For instance, at the heart of Christianity is vernacular translation: the Word becoming flesh as a prelude to an ongoing process of translation of that Word into every human culture and context.<sup>44</sup> Every faith tradition has gone through significant development and change in its history. Roman Catholicism has embraced contextualization and enculturation at countless points in its history and created organizational space for a myriad of reform and renewal movements (particularly through lay and religious orders). The Reformation was a movement of vernacular translation and innovation as well as restoration. This is a moment that calls for translation, adaptation, reinterpretation, and new expression of core traditions, practices, and patterns of community life, albeit in organizational forms that might bear little resemblance to predominant inherited models.

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 7–9.

Grounding that work in historical moments of change frees communities to risk their lives for the sake of innovation without sacrificing faithfulness, for they come to realize that faithfulness need not bind them to one particular organizational expression but instead to deeper commitments, values, and practices.

### *Leading Innovation*

What does all this mean for leaders of established religious organizations, many of whom are struggling to sustain their present organizational life and teetering on the edge of burnout (if not already over it)? Is this simply a new layer of difficult work that leaders must assume on top of everything else? In a word—no. The worst thing that leaders can do is to assume sole responsibility for innovation, as if it were a technical fix rather than a deeper adaptive challenge involving new learning on the part of everyone. Leaders cannot be the primary innovators but must cultivate the environments in which people do the work of interpretation, listening, experimentation, and adaptation.<sup>45</sup> What does this look like?

Senior leaders in congregations are responsible for sustaining the organization's established life so that enough stability and security exist for members of the congregation to risk learning and experimenting. It is unhelpful, initially at least, to displace the ongoing practices and patterns of congregational life by forcing the work of innovation to the center. That will bring loss and conflict that will destabilize the organization before a new future has been discerned. Instead, spaces on the edges of the community's life must be created and authorized in which this learning and experimentation can occur.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 102–07.

<sup>46</sup> See Govindarajan and Trimble, *The Other Side of Innovation*.



Leaders must legitimize and encourage the work of innovation through exercising interpretive leadership.<sup>47</sup> This involves developing a shared interpretation of the community's present reality in light of its past, its changing context, and its future. Interpretive leadership for innovation is best exercised through participatory spaces of communal deliberation and dialogue, for it requires negotiation of expectations and values on the part of the people. It is not about casting an inspiring vision; in fact, doing so can take the people off the hook for doing the generative work they need to do to discern an emerging vision for their life together.<sup>48</sup>

This is particularly the case when the core interpretive work focuses on questions of identity, meaning, and purpose in daily life—not on institutional mission. Unless congregations and other faith communities are able to respond meaningfully to the actual struggles faced by people in negotiating life in the pluralist, uncertain, fluid, insecure world that is the twenty-first century, they will have no future. Rather than concentrating on organizational renewal in itself, such renewal will likely come by changing the conversation to address where and how ordinary members and neighbors live and find meaning.

Refocusing a community's life on innovation, learning, and a different kind of conversation will require simplifying and giving up some current activities and practices. Discerning where the energy is among the people is a good way of doing this. Not everyone will embrace the work of innovation at the same pace.<sup>49</sup> Massive loss is involved as life in a faith community is reordered away from established patterns toward new ones. Such loss must be recognized and

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<sup>47</sup> See Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> See Linda A. Hill et al., *Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014), 66.

<sup>49</sup> See Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2003).

engaged through grief work.<sup>50</sup> Conflict will necessarily occur along the way; confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation must be core practices for the community to hold together.

## Conclusion

Although the path of engaging innovation is uncertain, risky, and demanding, the alternative for established religious organizations is far more devastating: the wholesale loss of meaningful connection with emerging generations and populations in American life. The gifts of established faith communities must be claimed, translated, reinterpreted, and expressed in new organizational forms, or they will be lost as their present institutional bearers disintegrate. Amidst the temptation to work harder at doing what they already know how to do, faith communities must go deeper into their own legacies and traditions in order to become learners and discover grounds for new expressions of their life. Although they might be relatively lost to recent memory, those expressions likely live deep in their past and may guide those communities into a new and faithful future.

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<sup>50</sup> See Kenneth J. McFayden, *Strategic Leadership for a Change: Facing Our Losses, Finding Our Future* (Herndon, Virg.: Alban Institute, 2009) and William M. Kondrath, *Facing Feelings in Faith Communities* (Herndon, Virg.: Alban Institute, 2013).