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# A Look at Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Introduction

What does “religion” look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Members of traditional religions (in this article using the word *traditional* to describe what Americans have understood by *religion*) might say that it looks pretty much the same as it had in the past.

But there are other voices that speak about the winds of change that have occurred for some in the religious realm in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the dramatic changes has been the understanding of religion itself.

## An Overview of Some Materials

This essay will concentrate on books and materials, written for different purposes, which define or use the word *religion* in ways very different from the traditional understanding of that term. This changed use and definition of the term *religion* is often coupled with a perception of the lessening of the influence of religion in Western culture. The majority of the authors referenced (David Zahl, Juan Floyd-Thomas, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Mark G. Toulouse, Rod Dreher, Tara Isabella Burton, and Steven Smith) are Christians.<sup>1</sup>



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A. The first book is *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our Religion and What to Do about It* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019). This book, authored by David Zahl, is about the exploding “marketplace in replacement religions.” (xii) Zahl writes that in recent times the word *religion* has come to have a different meaning than the traditional churchly one. Many today understand religion horizontally, centering on earthly things, rather than vertically, centering on God. Horizontal religion gives religious devotion to earthly things. Yet these horizontal religions still fasten on to the “promise of salvation.” (xiii)

Zahl believes that the religious needs of many today are being met by new horizontal religions described as busyness, romance, parenting, technology, work, leisure, food, and politics. Zahl laments the loss of a theology of God’s grace in Christ the Messiah.

Zahl’s understanding of horizontal religion is similar to Charles Taylor’s concept of an immanent frame. The immanent frame view largely dismisses the supernatural. What is important is what exists in this material world. Humans construct their lives for this world, not for any kind of transcendent good or in order to please any kind of God. People are primarily autonomous individuals who find their own individualistic and this-worldly spiritual or religious path. The immanent frame includes rigid moral positions which lack otherworldly transcendence and God.<sup>2</sup>

B. *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), written by Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, and Mark G. Toulouse, moves along the same lines as Zahl’s. This book looks at how sex, politics, business, entertainment, sports, science, and technology have become locations of religious meaning and cultural worship with their own spiritual narratives, teachings, ethics, and rituals. The religions of sex, politics, business and the rest are horizontal religions. The authors see the rise of these horizontal religions in relation to the fading influence of traditional religion.

C. The third book is *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). In this book, Douglas Murray, a gay atheist, writes that for many, traditional religion no longer provides the “explanations for our existence.” (1) The void left by the fading influence of established religions is now being filled by “a new metaphysics” or “a new religion” which falls into the category of identity politics. (2) These identity politics are seen to have moral absolutes that are a secular way of identifying right and wrong. This form of rightness and wrongness includes an ethical view of life in this world, which echoes religious forms of right and wrong. The difficulty Murray sees is that the new metaphysics leaves little or no room for true forgiveness. (176–83) *The Madness of Crowds* was endorsed by both Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. Murray like the Thomases and Toulouse, describes politics in a way that accords with Zahl’s definition of a horizontal religion.<sup>3</sup>

Others have echoed Murray’s concern about the lack of forgiveness in this world of “religion without religion.” Adherents of these “new secular religions” often see

their “fellow citizens” as “embodiments of sin” because they have different beliefs. Those holding different beliefs often receive swift and unforgiving judgment in this life.<sup>4</sup> Joshua Mitchell writes that the current secular religious awakening is an awakening “without God and without forgiveness.” The desire to right wrongs remains, “but gone is the promise of forgiveness.” Thus, the “sense of guilt” remains.<sup>5</sup>

Another author writing about the politicization of the Christian faith has stated that when “the Christian faith is politicized churches become repositories not of grace but of grievances ... where aggression and nastiness are sacralized.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to politics being given the aura of religion, George Marsden has noted that “political loyalties” can “create a religious like faith” that overtakes or “transforms a more traditional religious faith.”<sup>7</sup>

D: The fourth book is *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Penguin, 2020). In this book, Rod Dreher devotes an entire chapter to “Progressivism as Religion.” (47–68) This chapter is another illustration of the void created by the perception of the fading influence of traditional religions, which then is filled by an alternative belief system which has its own dogmas, morality codes, and outsiders or non-believers that it opposes. Again, politics is labeled a religion. Dreher references an essay by James A. Lindsay and Mike Nayna, “Postmodern Religion and the Faith of Social Justice,” which also speaks along these same lines.<sup>8</sup> Though all of these authors might not see the religious nature of politics in the same way, the significant point is that they all see politics as a religion—a horizontal religion. The title of Dreher’s book comes from an essay by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not By Lies!”<sup>9</sup>

E: The fifth book is by Tara Isabella Burton, and is entitled *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2020). Burton notes that many today see themselves as “creators of their own bespoke religions, mixing and matching spiritual and aesthetic and experiential and philosophical traditions.”(10) These people are looking for “a sense of meaning in the world” and for a “purpose” for their lives, a community to share their beliefs with, and “rituals to bring the power of [their] experiences into achievable, everyday life.” These individuals don’t want to receive doctrines, but to pick, purchase, or create them. They want to pick a spiritual path that feels authentic and meaningful for them. They look for “intuitional spirituality” rather than “institutional religion.” (10)

Burton states that “new gods are everywhere” today. They are visible in shared sacred texts films and programs like Harry Potter, Star Wars, and the Game of Thrones, There is the wellness culture, astrology, tarot cards, yoga, erotic dinner parties, and other this world-things that are sought out in order to “cultivate a sense of spiritual well-being.” (240) Burton writes about the gospel of self-care, and human productivity, and the powerful earthly doctrines of social justice and utopianism. She sees the “spiritual marketplace” as “overflowing” and the “new religious landscape” filled with self-expression, self-made spirituality, and self-betterment. This new

landscape includes writing one's "own script for morality, sexuality, and society" according to the dictates of one's own heart. (241) Burton believes that we currently do not live in a godless world, but in an "anti-institutional" world. (242)

Burton views certain political movements as replicating traditional religion when the adherents chant jointly shared semi-creedal words in unison, share common rituals, share a utopian vision of the world, and a sense of moral renewal. *Strange Rites* helps readers see the semi-religious meaning being given to earthly things that were previously understood as secular. She also writes about the influence of New Age (Eastern) religion in America. (22–46, 122–133)<sup>10</sup>

Burton refers to Steven D. Smith's book, *Pagans and Christians in the City* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018) which sets forth the distinction between those who have the objects of their faith located "within this world" (horizontal religion) and traditional Christians whose faith is centered "outside" this world in a transcendent God (vertical religion). (Burton, 245)

### **How is it Expressed?**

What is happening to religion and spirituality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that with the lessening of the influence of religion, especially Christianity, in American culture, many different "religions" or "spiritualities" have arisen. As one author noted, "In any given society, there is a relatively constant and finite supply of religious conviction. What varies is how and where it is expressed." If those convictions are not expressed through traditional religion, then they will be expressed in other ways—in politics, nationalism, parenthood, and in many other areas. The above works illustrate the reality of that thought. Many now have come to believe that "all deeply felt conviction" is a form of religion or spirituality which will fill the void left by the fading influence of traditional religion.<sup>11</sup> Thus many will express their religious convictions horizontally rather than vertically.

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### **Examples:**

There are any number of other books which illustrate the changed definition of religion and the horizontal perspective of religion. One states that Darwinism is a religion.<sup>12</sup> Another speaks of sport as a religious phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Science fiction is seen to be imitating the sacred. One essay speaks about the spirituality of science fiction.<sup>14</sup> Six of the science fiction-based religions that currently exist are studied in another book.<sup>15</sup>

One book speaks about science as a means of salvation.<sup>16</sup> The spirituality of atheism is laid out in another.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary sociology is viewed as a sacred project by another book.<sup>18</sup> There are books which set forth the religious nature of politics, environmentalism, economics, and capitalism.<sup>19</sup> Other books understand religion and spirituality to be devoid of any reference to God or any kind of supernatural creatures.<sup>20</sup> This movement to a more secular or worldly view of religion is one of globalization's effects on religion.<sup>21</sup>

One does not need to agree with all of the ideas in the above books and materials to see that all of them set forth the reality of a changed understanding of religion in American culture.

### **How to Respond:**

The above materials, though written from different perspectives and for different purposes, illustrate the changed religious climate of America. Many people now understand the term "religion" in a more secular and godless way. The void left by the perceived fading influence of organized religion needs to be filled. The authors of the above materials see that void being filled by alternative religions, new religious movements, and religious substitutes that were traditionally understood to be secular in nature but have now been given metaphysical characteristics usually seen in more traditional religion.

The current changed religious climate needs to be responded to with sound Christian teaching and godly social action motivated by faith in Christ and love for the neighbor. Christ came into this world and dealt with both the spiritual and physical needs of human beings. The Christian church today needs to respond scripturally to the human conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so that the religious void seen by many is filled with sound law/gospel preaching and teaching, and godly social action that addresses problems like racism, poverty, hunger, the environment, the relationship of science and religion, and the like.<sup>22</sup> In these and other social causes Christians should seek to partner with those outside the faith to display a godly Christian lifestyle which includes responding to these problems, and which witness to the fact that the perceived void left by traditional religion is not a void at all—Christians are actively engaged in addressing the moral and social questions and problems of the day.

People today are looking for purpose for their lives, a community in which to feel a sense of belonging, and ways of addressing the needs like those noted above. The example of Christian believers addressing those needs in the public square is an evangelistic witness to God's love for all human beings in Christ the Savior, and provides godly examples of meaning and purpose in life from a traditional religious viewpoint. These things also witness to the authenticity of the Christian faith.

The Christian Church is truly a family, a community to which believers belong. The early Christians exhibited a communal understanding of community. (Acts 2:42–47) Even atheists have high praise for the expression of community seen among

Christians.<sup>23</sup> That sense of community needs to be cultivated and shared. The Christian Church truly has resources to help others and to address the world's needs, most notably the Gospel of God's love and forgiveness in Christ and the second great commandment of love for the neighbor. The church should offer these resources in a world which is growing more devoid of grace and forgiveness. Courses at the seminaries of our church body should include explanations of the changed religious climate and means of addressing those changes. Everything religious has not changed for the historic Christian faith still exists.

The Christian Church needs to seize this moment and to act boldly. It needs to teach the doctrine of justification and all other doctrines clearly and diligently. In its teaching and preaching, the church needs to emphasize the importance of living a Christian lifestyle that is consistent with the teachings of the Christian faith. There is also great importance to Christians understanding their social responsibilities in the world and their exercise of Christian ethics. Christians need to exhibit the uniqueness and importance of the Christian faith in the midst of the multiplicity of religions and spiritualities that exist today.

The Christian's lifestyle should include Christians exercising stewardship of the planet. There is also the need to exhibit a proper understanding of the sacred and the secular, that the Christian's life in this world is a holy calling and vocation in two kingdoms, and that the Christian has duties and responsibilities in both the church and the world. The truths of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions which nurture the faith of believers within the walls of the church need to be put into loving action out in the world. Christians are to be letting their lights shine in the world for the glorification of God. (Mt 5:16)

The Christian Church has historically been a church emphasizing missional outreach. From a traditional Christian perspective one can envision an impact on witnessing and evangelism as a result of the abovementioned changes to the definition of religion. Future Christian evangelists may hear this response: "Oh, you are talking to me about Jesus and Christianity. It is good that you have your own religion. I also have mine. My religion is my fitness regimen. It gives me purpose and meaning to my life." Will the church be trained to respond effectively?

Future Christian evangelists may hear this response: "Oh, you are talking to me about Jesus and Christianity. It is good that you have your own religion. I also have mine. My religion is my fitness regimen. It gives me purpose and meaning to my life." Will the church be trained to respond effectively?

The positive ways of responding noted above will not always happen, nor have they always occurred in the past. The reality of course is that no one in the Christian Church lives sinlessly. At times the world turns Christians upside down. Charity towards



others is at times lacking—the hungry are not fed, the naked are not clothed, the lonely are not visited. At times the atmosphere in congregations is marred by strife, and a community spirit is lacking. Putting one’s Christian faith into action is at times neglected. There is the need for daily contrition and repentance, and the daily need for the reception of God’s grace in Christ to pardon sins and enable more godly living.

### **Conclusion:**

Christianity is a religion that is both horizontal and vertical. This is taught by the doctrine of the two kingdoms.<sup>24</sup> Christians have duties and responsibilities in this world and in the religious world. They are to serve God and their fellow human beings. Christ the transcendent God became a human being to live on this earth, to suffer and die for the sins of all human beings, to rise from the dead, and to enable human beings to live godly lives here and to dwell with Him in a holy state in heaven. God wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, and to have eternal life in heaven after this world.

Traditionally the Christian Church is understood to be comprised of those who have faith in Christ and the triune God and who gather around God’s Word and the sacraments. In worship Christians confess their sins and receive God’s justifying grace in Word and Sacrament. Thus, they are strengthened in their faith and empowered to live in the world, and to serve God and their fellow human beings by their godly lives. This serves as a witness to their Savior Jesus Christ in word and deed so that others would know of Christ and be saved.

As Christians serve in their various callings and vocations in the church and the world, they need to remember that the Christian Church is not an earthly political organization. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (Jn 18:36 NKJV)

Though the church is not an earthly political organization, it does exist to serve in the world to help meet the needs of a broken humanity. Jesus’ life is our example. He came into this world to help broken sinful human beings deal with earthly needs like hunger, nakedness, illness, and imprisonment, and He reminds all of His followers, “In as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” (Mt 25:40 NKJV)

Jesus’ ministry had one purpose – the redemption of sinners and the eternal salvation of lost souls. All that Christ did served that purpose. That purpose was ultimately accomplished by His death on Calvary’s cross, and by His glorious resurrection and an empty tomb. Therefore, all His Church does is for that purpose, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.” (Lk 19:10)



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The page numbers for the five main books in A-E are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 539–593.

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary politics has been given an “increasingly eschatological” character, “inspiring a secular Exodus” and “a secular Pentecost.” Matthew Rose, “Our Secular Theodicy,” *First Things* (December 2017 Number 278), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Shadi Hamid, “America Without God,” *The Atlantic* (April 2021), posted online March 10, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/america-politics-religion/618072/>; Sam Han, *Technologies of Religion: Spheres of the Sacred in a Post-secular Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> James F. Keating, “Woke Religion,” *First Things* (April 2021 – Number 312), 50. This is a review of Joshua Mitchell’s book, *American Awakening* (New York & London: Encounter Books, 2020).

Noted environmentalist, Michael Schellenberger wrote that religious environmentalism has become negative, angry, and fearful, and lacks kindness and forgiveness. Michael Schellenberger, *Apocalypse Never: Why Environmentalism Alarmism Hurts Us All* (New York: Harper, 2020). Graeme Green, “America Has Forgotten How to Forgive,” *The Atlantic* (posted March 19, 2021) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/america-has-lost-ability-forgive/618336/>; Eric Spitznagel, “How social media has destroyed our ability to forgive” posted December 21, 2019. <https://nypost.com/2019/12/21/how-social-media-has-destroyed-our-ability-to-forgive/>; Tyrone Thompson, “It’s time We Talk About America’s Inability to Forgive Black Men,” posted December 12, 2019. <https://talkrealsolutions.com/its-time-we-talk-about-americas-inability-to-forgive-black-men/>

<sup>6</sup> Peter Wehner, “The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart” *The Atlantic* (posted October 24, 2021) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/evangelical-trump-christians-politics/620469/>. See also Stephen L. Carter, *God’s Name In Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*, Kindle edition (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Wehner, “The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart.”

<sup>8</sup> James A. Lindsay & Mike Nayna, “Postmodern Religion and the Faith of Social Justice,” *Areo* December 18, 2018; <https://areomagazine.com/2018/12/18/postmodern-religion-and-the-faith-of-social-justice/>

<sup>9</sup> Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not By Lies!” in Edward E. Ericson, Jr., and Daniel J. Mahoney, eds., *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings 1947-2005* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2012), 556–560.

<sup>10</sup> For more on how Eastern and New Age beliefs have impacted religion and spirituality see David G Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Liselotte Frisk, “Globalization: A Key Factor in Contemporary Religious Change,” *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 5 (2009), i-xiv; Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 124–154. An example of the emphasis on this-world “theology” in the culture of Roszak’s day is: “This is the one and only firmament. .... The ways of this world are the ways of Heaven.” Roszak, *Counter Culture*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Hamid, “America Without God.”

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Ruse, *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Mary Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Eric Bain-Selbo & D. Gregory Sapp, *Understanding Sport as a Religious Phenomenon: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Grigg, *Science Fiction and the Imitation of the Sacred* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Armand J. Boehme, “The Final Spiritual Frontier? The Spirituality of Science Fiction,” *European Journal of Science and Theology* Vol. 14, No. 5 (October 2018), 15–24.

<sup>15</sup> C.M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016). Cusack’s book includes the religion of Jediism, a science fiction-based religion that had its genesis in the Star Wars saga. Star Wars is one of the shared “religious” texts in our modern culture as Burton noted in her book, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. See E in the text above.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Armand J. Boehme, “The Spirituality of Atheism,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* Vol. 25, No. 1 (May 2017), 105–122.

<sup>18</sup> Christian Smith, *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Robert H. Nelson, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion Versus Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010); Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Peter Heehs, *Spirituality Without God: A Global History of Thought and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Frisk, “Globalization,” vii; Armand J. Boehme, Globalization and Religion: The Influential Six-Pack,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* Vol. 28, No. 1 (May 2020), 109–110.

<sup>22</sup> *Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry* (St. Louis: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, February 1994); *Together With All Creatures: Caring for God’s Living Earth* (St. Louis: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, April 2010); *In Christ All things Hold Together: The Intersection of Science & Christian Theology* (St. Louis: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, February 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 21–66. See also Bruce Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity Is Better Off With Religion Than Without It* (New York: Alpha Books, 2009), 1–46. These pages speak about the meaning religion gives to life and the sense of community it engenders.

<sup>24</sup> For an exposition of the doctrine of the two kingdoms see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 43–83.