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The Churching Of America, 1776-1990: Winners And Losers In Our Religious Economy



Synopsis

In this provocative book, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark challenge popular perceptions about American religion. They view the religious environment as a free market economy, where churches compete for souls. The story they tell is one of gains for upstart sects and losses for mainline denominations. Although many Americans assume that religious participation has declined in America, Finke and Stark present a different picture. In 1776, fewer than 1 in 5 Americans were active in church affairs. Today, church membership includes about 6 out of 10 people. But, as Finke and Stark show, not all denominations benefited from this growth. They explain how and why the leading eighteenth-century churches began their descent, while two newcomer sects, the Baptists and the Methodists, gained ground. They also analyze why the Methodists then began a long, downward slide, why the Baptists continued to succeed, how the Catholic Church met the competition of ardent Protestant missionaries, and why the Catholic commitment has declined since Vatican II. The authors also explain why ecumenical movements always fail. In short, Americans are not abandoning religion; they have been moving away from established denominations. A "sect-church process" is always under way, Finke and Stark argue, as successful churches lose their organizational vigor and are replaced by less worldly groups. Some observers assert that the rise in church membership rates indicates increased participation, not increased belief. Finke and Stark challenge this as well. They find that those groups that have gained the greatest numbers have demanded that their followers accept traditional doctrines and otherworldliness. They argue that religious organizations can thrive only when they comfort souls and demand sacrifice. When theology becomes too logical, or too secular, it loses people.

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Customer Reviews

This easy to read work intrigues. It does this by carefully challenging the previous conclusions of the churching of America, i.e. Ahlstrom et al. Starting with Colonial times, it reviews the quantitative analysis and the qualitative conclusions as well. It determined that much beginning from these times on has been distorted by bias and not using the best census material available. They deduce that successful church movements base their focus on otherworldliness, starting out thus as sects which grow. The tendency however is to eventually make minor concessions to the culture, thus shifting the emphasis away from what gave them success, high tension with their culture towards lowered levels. This cyclical pattern they have found repeated over and over, the sects becoming churches thereby giving birth to new sects that revitalize the church and grow. The pattern begins with the upstart Baptists and Methodists outgrowing the established Congregationalists, etc. Then themselves, especially the Methodists losing their dominant position to new groups. Their conclusions are fascinating, disputing much of the established findings of scholarly American Christian history. Rather than finding the changes in churching American as attributable to sudden cultural/societal glitches, rather the authors find "a long, slow and consistent increase in religious participation from 1776 to 1926--with the rate inching up slightly after 1926 and then hovering near 60 percent. Second, they conclude that the primary factor is what they term "the sect-church process" (roughly sketched out above) in supporting the progress in America. The future? They place confidence in humans as "rational beings, not puppets enslaved to the strings of history and always have the capacity to choose." Their surveys and literature they use suggest that American will continue to want and find or start movements which maximize otherworld rewards sufficient to inspire sacrifice. One must remember this is sociology speaking, not theology. Theology of the best kind tells of God's unfolding plan of salvation (heilsgesichte) which will occur exactly as God has planned. True faith, belief and membership in this salvation is His doing through His church, where His Word and Sacraments are truly spoken and distributed.

Great book of Church history.

In this fascinating book, the authors (both sociology professors) look at the evolution of the American religious landscape since the Revolutionary War. In their study, they discovered three trends. First of all, in frontier areas (which in 1776 still included whole swaths of the thirteen

colonies) there was a larger proportion of men to women, and consequently a lower rate of church attendance. As areas became settled, the proportion of men to women decreased, and the rate of church attendance increased. Secondly, they found that sects (religious organizations with a high level of tension with their surrounding sociocultural environment) tended to have a higher rate of growth, and a higher level of commitment than churches (religious organizations with a low level of tension with their environment). The third trend is that over time, sects transform themselves into churches, lowering their demands on members and as such lessening their tension with their environment. As they follow American history, they show how these trends affected the growth and/or decline of the fortunes of various churches, both Protestant and Catholic. I must admit to have been absolutely captivated by this book. Not only do the authors make an excellent case for their theory, but also the book itself is compelling reading. I was especially interested in what the authors had to say about how denominations change, and what it means. I greatly enjoyed this book, and recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of the Christian church in the United States.

Even though this book was published eight years ago, it still ought to be on the book shelf of any serious student of American Christianity, and be a part of the strategic knowledge base of any denominational executive who pretends to know what it will take for his or her denominational organization to be a viable force for societal and spiritual transformation in the twenty-first century. The 214 years of American religious history covered by this book represents the transformation from a time when as a nation most people took no part in organized religion, to a time when nearly two-thirds do. The continual founding of new religious movements during this two-century period has allowed for a freshness that could not be controlled by institutionalized religion. The control exercised by established churchlike religious organizations in the past actually led to their decline. They could not survive in a free market religious economy. Methods of establishing control included identifying a state-endorsed church, controlling who could be ordained and serve as pastors, and having a non-congregational polity or form of governance. While it may seem to be a contradiction, it is the high expectations that religious organizations--particularly congregations--place on individual believers that results in a tenacious and growing church movement. What was true in 1776 is still true in 2000 and beyond. To discover the secrets of past and future success and vitality, purchase and read this book.

In this book Finke and Stark take a very analytical and careful approach to why some

denominations grow and others shrink. Rather than rehashing the same ideas and theories, the perform numerical analysis of the actual percentage of Americans in each denomination, state by state, from 1776 to 1990. The results are amazing. United Methodists: note that our church has been shrinking since _1850_ as a percentage of the American public. Basically since the circuit riders dismounted and we established seminaries. The conclusions are frightening and will make you reevaluate "what's wrong with our church". If this book is correct, most of the solutions suggested by other books will not address the core issues. You must read this book!!!

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