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AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES
AMERICAN RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS
A THREAT TO RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Richard Grigg

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*For the students of Sacred Heart University,
who almost invariably show a genuine openness to the Other*

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Preface

The challenge to belief represented by the competing claims of the world religions has fascinated me for almost as long as I can recall. Indeed, it seems to me a challenge second only to the problem of theodicy for believers in God. Over twenty-five years ago, I concluded a book on Paul Tillich with an examination of how Tillich's thought might be developed into a "world theology," or what would today be called a "pluralist theology." I have taken the opportunity in this present book to consider the many different ways in which believers today approach the challenge of the potentially disconfirming Other, the member of a religious tradition different from one's own. It is not my intent here to propose my own solution to the challenge of religious pluralism, but rather to examine in depth the diverse strategies already on the scene, from outright denial of the problem to creative pluralist theological strategies to New Age agendas that essentially encourage seekers to abandon their traditional religious homes.

As with any book project, I owe much to many. Thanks to Debbie Alexander for her inspiration and for introducing me to various New Age practitioners and gatherings. Those introductions allowed for an empirical component in my examination of the New Age and its role in American religious pluralism.

My thanks, secondly, to regular conversation partners who never fail to provide the intellectual stimulation that I find is required to keep me going on any research project, even if our

conversations are not always directly focused upon the project in question: Marla Ackerley, Christopher Sharrett, Walter Brooks, and Sidney Gottlieb.

Sidney Gottlieb must be singled out for a special word of thanks, for not only is Sid a model of scholarship, an expert on figures as diverse as George Herbert and Alfred Hitchcock, but he has served as the editor for this book, as for other Sacred Heart University Press volumes, and he carries out that task with extraordinary competence and artistry.

Thanks, too, to the referees who read the manuscript for the Sacred Heart University Press. I gleaned a great deal from their suggestions. It is obligatory to say – but in this case it also happens to be entirely true – that any weaknesses in the book are most likely the result of points at which I unwisely decided to disregard those readers' advice.

Finally, thanks to Dr. Seamus Carey, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Sacred Heart University, who had an important role in seeing this project through to its completion.

Introduction

America has been the land of religious pluralism at least since the seventeenth century, when European nations began founding colonies in North America. There is no doubt that much light could be shed upon American history, as well as upon our contemporary situation in the United States, by contemplating how this religious pluralism has affected the whole sweep of our national experience. But what is at issue for us in the pages that follow is more narrowly philosophical and theological. In earlier eras, Americans were unlikely to encounter persons who embraced religions other than Christianity or Judaism. But today, we live in the proverbial global village. The explosion of new forms of electronic media makes it almost impossible for the reasonably curious American to avoid confronting religions other than his or her own. More concretely, the person occupying the office cubicle next to me may very well be a Hindu or a Muslim or a Buddhist. On an even more personal level, religiously mixed marriages provide a potent example of religious pluralism.

How does the diversity of other religions that the individual American believer must confront nearly every day undermine, whether explicitly or implicitly, the claims of his or her own spirituality? Philosopher Charles Taylor perceptively observes that this concrete confrontation of different belief systems results in their “mutual fragilization” and forces the individual believer to reckon with “the undermining sense that others think differently.” The other believer threatens to become the disconfirming Other.¹

Initially, America's spiritual and religious pluralism, far from appearing to be a threat to belief, seems wholly positive. First, this pluralism is a result of a robust spiritual culture: it is reasonable to suppose that we would not have so many spiritual options to choose from in America if there were not a large number of persons who wished to engage in the spiritual search. Pluralism is, in other words, a reflection of the fact that a significant number of Americans not only wish to be religious, but that their desire to be religious has led religious entrepreneurs to offer a host of religious options from which religious seekers can choose. Second, this pluralism is not only a result of spiritual robustness but actually has a causal role in reinforcing spirituality – more exactly, it reinforces the general phenomenon of the spiritual quest – because the very existence of so many endorsements of the spiritual quest lends that quest an enhanced plausibility.²

On the other hand, however, spiritual and religious pluralism confront the believer with a theoretical challenge. The specific options arrayed before me, as opposed to the general phenomenon of the spiritual quest, present competing spiritual worldviews that frequently contradict one another: Lutheran Christianity champions a God who graciously becomes a man in Jesus Christ in order to die on the cross to atone for human sin, while Sunni Islam holds that the very notion of God appearing in human form is tantamount to idolatry and that there is no need for a divine act of atonement. What is more, the all-important grounds upon which I assume that the claims of my own religious or spiritual worldview rest – divine revelation, for example, or supernatural intuition – are typically the very same grounds adduced by those pieties that contradict my own. Hence, I have no way to reassure myself, let alone the advocates of competing views, that my own claims are valid and that those that contradict them are invalid. Among a host of contradictory perspectives in which no one perspective is consistent with any of the others, one perspective, at most, can be sound. And because none of the perspectives possesses evidence by means of which to falsify the others, they effectively cancel one another out. Indeed, given that I hold to one spiritual worldview

out of a whole menagerie of contradictory ones, the simple mathematical odds are that my own perspective is false. This is the potent challenge represented by Taylor's disconfirming Other.

We confront the paradox, then, that while the pluralism at issue here seems allied, by some measures, with spiritual fecundity in American society, it also possesses the potential powerfully to undermine belief. Thus it is that, although various commentators have opined for decades that a hitherto vigorous American piety might eventually succumb to the relentless onslaught of the scientific worldview or to some other force, we need to consider the possibility that the very success of so many spiritualities in America may actually prove to be a significant threat at least to the most parochial, unmodified forms of American spiritual belief. Where Christianity is concerned, which shall be our focus in this exploration, these traditional forms of belief are represented by "mainline" traditions, churches such as the Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, and Episcopalian.³

While terms such as "religion," "spirituality," and "pluralism" are hardly esoteric, the quest for precision dictates that we not take it for granted that their meaning is clear. I shall make an initial attempt to be precise here in the Introduction by offering an interpretation of the history of spiritual pluralism in America. This interpretation involves a decidedly brief rehearsal of that history, divided up into a consideration of the Colonial period, the roles of revivalism and fundamentalism, and the constant presence of what Catherine Albanese has called metaphysical religion.⁴

Religious pluralism was at the very heart of the Colonial experience in America. The Puritans, those English religious dissenters whose thinking was informed in large part by the theology of John Calvin and who established settlements such as the Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts, seem ordinarily to amass a disproportionate amount of attention in popular accounts of Colonial religion. They include, after all, the "Pilgrims" of grade-school lore, zealous god-fearers who made the famous journey on the Mayflower. But, of course, the Colonial experience was one of

diverse colonies in no small measure because of the different religious groups that came to these shores: for example, significant numbers of Roman Catholics (among others) found their way to Maryland, Quakers to Pennsylvania, and Anglicans to colonies such as Virginia that were a function of entrepreneurship more than of escape from religious persecution. New York, which began as the Dutch colony of New Netherlands, illustrates all by itself the pluralism of the Colonial scene. As Winthrop Hudson and John Corrigan explain,

When the English took over control of New Netherlands in 1664, the new colony was the most religiously heterogeneous area in America. The Dutch Reformed church quite understandably was the largest single religious group, and throughout the seventeenth century it was to continue to have more adherents than all other groups combined. But as Governor Dongan (a Roman Catholic) reported in 1687, there were also French Calvinists, German Lutherans, Congregationalists from New England, several varieties of Quakers, Mennonites, Baptists, some Roman Catholics, and a few Jews. "In short," he explained, "of all sorts of opinions there are some, and of the most part none at all."⁵

That is, the Governor is pointing out that, while many religious groups were represented in New York, the majority of his constituents had no strong opinions about religion.

Rhode Island, too, has a special place among the Colonies as a symbol of pluralism, insofar as Roger Williams was able to bring his convictions about religious freedom to fruition there, so that a host of different religious groups flourished. A small Jewish community could be found in Newport, Rhode Island, as early as the 1650s, and a synagogue constructed in 1763 can be found there still today.⁶

We are already in a position to catch a glimpse of the initial trajectory, at least, of American spiritual pluralism and to begin to make some terminological distinctions. We can take as our point of

departure a statement that has become a mantra for a good many Americans today but that would have meant little or nothing to their Colonial forebears: "I'm spiritual but not religious." Ordinarily, one who makes this assertion means to suggest that he or she is interested in a life of participation in something beyond the contours of the visible world, a form of participation affording the experience of self-transcendence, but that such a life is not to be found within the confines of "institutional religion." That is, while "spirituality" is concerned with a quest for participation in a reality beyond the everyday and the resultant experience of self-transcendence, "religion" is here defined as a subset of that quest, one characterized by being part of a group with clearly defined rules of organization and requirements for belonging.⁷

Given this use of terms, what the brief survey above suggests is that Colonial spiritual pluralism was, on the surface at least, mostly of the "religious" variety: it was the result of institutionally well-defined groups, usually having an origin in Britain or on the Continent, rubbing shoulders in Colonial America. Even the Puritans, after all, though they were religious dissenters from the Church of England, were intent on establishing precise rules of membership and organization. And, despite their dissenting status, they owed the vast majority of what they believed to institutional forms of European Christianity that predated them. Similarly, while there was plenty of movement within early American Christianity, so that Congregational churches could end up being Unitarian or Universalist, for example, even Unitarianism and Universalism had European roots, and both took on recognizably institutional forms in this country. If "spirituality" is the broader term, then, embracing all forms of participation and self-transcendence in a reality perceived to be beyond the everyday, including the institutional subdivision called "religion," we can say that America has been spiritually pluralistic from the Colonial period on, but that in that period itself the pluralism was largely of the religious variety.

That it was not entirely religious in character, however, can be determined from two considerations, in particular. First, it is important to keep in mind that, despite the desire of some present-

day commentators to present glowing accounts of a thoroughly pious early America, the Colonies had a significant number of inhabitants for whom God, religion, and spirituality were of little concern. While the fact that Colonial Americans were less pious than some would have us believe is not an example of religious pluralism, it nonetheless suggests more diversity than some would have us believe existed in early America. Recall the brief quotation from the Governor of the New York Colony cited above: while a whole host of religious opinions was represented in his colony, most inhabitants actually held to “none at all.” Indeed, the available data indicates that church-going was at its lowest point in the whole of American history in the period from roughly 1750-1790, when only approximately seventeen percent of the population attended church.⁸ Perhaps it is simply terminologically inaccurate to see the phenomenon of unbelief in Colonial America as part of its spiritual pluralism. Unbelief is not a form of religion or spirituality, after all, but rather its negation. But the element of unbelief does further variegate the spiritual scene in early America.

Second, and perhaps more important, many colonists were able to combine their adherence to a well-defined, institutionalized religious tradition with folk beliefs and practices that flourished outside institutional walls. Contemporary historians have gone to great lengths to show that the American colonists lived in a world full of heavenly portents and bizarre events in nature, of fearful acts of fate and uncanny evil forces. Colonists consulted fortunetellers and astrological charts and saw ghosts and monsters in the forests.⁹ Thus, if it can rightly be said, as Shirley Jackson Case would have it, that the “sky hung low in the Ancient world,” something very similar can be said for the atmosphere of early America.¹⁰ As a result, we must conclude that early American pluralism was not only of the institutional religious variety – one might also dub this the “denominational” variety – but that it had wider spiritual dimensions.

Revivalism and fundamentalism added something distinctive to the American equation, and further enhanced spiritual pluralism on these shores. While revivalism as it developed in America had its roots in movements on the Continent and in Britain, such as

Pietism and Methodism, it took on a life of its own once transplanted here and insinuated itself into the fabric of American piety. One thinks, for instance, of the two Great Awakenings, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively, and of their impact upon the American religious landscape. It is no accident that arguably the most paradigmatic of American composers, Charles Ives, drew much of the inspiration for his *Third Symphony* from the phenomenon of the camp meeting so much a part of American revivalism, nor that, on the other end of the musical spectrum, a seminal twentieth-century rock band, Creedence Clearwater Revival, took its name from the same phenomenon. Revivalism has had a lasting impact upon American culture.

One of the most significant features of early revivalism was its emphasis on individual religious experience. The believer expected to have what Søren Kierkegaard would call, however foreign the expression to the American believer's own ears, an "absolute relation to the Absolute."¹¹ Revivalism's emphasis on the individual and his or her proximity to the divine was paralleled in other varieties of American piety. New England Transcendentalism, for instance, whose preeminent representative was Ralph Waldo Emerson, had roots in the thought-world of intellectual luminaries such as F.H. Jacobi, G.W.F. Hegel, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. But Transcendentalism's emphasis on the immediate presence of the divine to the human person ran parallel to the revivalist conviction that the believer ought to experience God directly, even though the latter had a less impressive philosophical foundation.

Fundamentalism is, at least in part, an offspring of revivalist Christianity. For while I have chosen to emphasize revivalism's emphasis upon the phenomenon of individual religious experience, such experience was, in revivalism, inextricably tied to a brand of preaching that was informed by a literalist reading of the Christian Bible. It was in the early part of the twentieth century that some Christians took the name "fundamentalist," holding firm to what they took to be "fundamentals" of Christian belief under siege in the modern world. These fundamentals included, above all else, a belief in the word-for-word inspiration of the Bible by God and the

consequent commitment to read it literally on everything from the creation stories in Genesis to the account of the virginal conception of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout describe American fundamentalism's origins this way:

The movement which came to be called fundamentalism was born of the instinct that there could be no compromise with Darwinian evolution without the loss of Christian faith. Between 1915 and 1920 a group of conservative scholars published twelve short volumes called *The Fundamentals*, which laid down the nonnegotiable requirements of Christianity. In 1919 the conservatives founded the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (in opposition to the [mainline Protestant] Federal Council of Churches). . . . They charged that their adversaries were no longer Christians but founders of an entirely new religion.¹²

In more recent years, the term “fundamentalist” has probably more often been used as a term of critique and derision than of self-identification. Hence, while Christians who have accepted the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation initiated in nineteenth-century Europe, can refer to their biblically literalist counterparts as “fundamentalists,” and while the press in the United States frequently dubs militant Islamic groups as “Islamic fundamentalists,” today's Christian literalists are more apt to define themselves with terms such as “evangelical” or “born-again.” Whatever the history of the term “fundamentalism,” however, the defensive theological posture to which it points is still an extraordinarily important part of the pluralistic religious environment in America. As a result, American spiritual pluralism is characterized not simply by a cacophony of competing positive proposals for what ought to be believed, but also by voices at least equally concerned with the negative task of defeating, or at least holding out against, forces seen as corrosive of genuine piety.

In addition to the large number of institutionalized forms of belief – the religious denominations – that have powered American

religious pluralism and the dynamics that folk piety, revivalism, and fundamentalism have added to it, we must also consider the longstanding role played by what Catherine Albanese has dubbed “metaphysical” spirituality. In her magisterial history, *A Republic of Mind*, Albanese defines that all-important current of American piety by focusing on four characteristics. First, it is characterized by “a preoccupation with mind and its powers,” where mind is an expansive concept ranging from cognition all the way to clairvoyance.¹³ Second, metaphysical spirituality posits a correspondence between a divine macrocosm and the human microcosm (here the characteristic American emphasis on the proximity of the divine and the human, the emphasis on divine immanence, is in full flower) (p. 13). Third, metaphysical spirituality espouses an understanding of reality that emphasizes movement and energy (p. 13). And fourth, this characteristically American movement expresses “a yearning for salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing” (p. 15). This metaphysical form of the spiritual quest includes everything from Theosophy to Christian Science, and it leads in our own time to so-called New Age spirituality and to discrete new religions such as Scientology. Of special importance for our purposes is the fact that this metaphysical piety contributes to American spiritual pluralism not just insofar as it is one more tendency to be added to the mix, but because, in Albanese’s words, “the metaphysical world provides abundant materials that emphasize, especially clearly, its pluralism and, more, its fractiousness” (p. 7). That is, metaphysical spirituality is internally pluralistic; internal diversity is one of its most salient features, an especially relevant note that should be added, for our purposes, to the four defining characteristics of metaphysical piety listed above.

The dynamics of the forms of spirituality briefly considered here – Colonial piety, revivalism, fundamentalism, and metaphysical spirituality – continue to wield an influence in our own day. If Colonial pluralism was fueled first and foremost simply by the many different versions of institutional Christianity, along with a dash of Judaism, brought to America by settlers, the ongoing immigration so

characteristic of the United States has continually added to our pluralism of religious institutions. Waves of immigration that brought increasing numbers of Jews, Catholics, Lutherans, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and other European groups to the United States have been followed by immigration from other lands that has added different world religions to the mix, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. As for revivalism, the emphasis on divine-human intimacy, far from being relegated to the period of the Great Awakenings, is today as American as cherry pie. For example, a significant number of contemporary Americans claim a “personal relationship” with Jesus Christ. And forms of Christian belief derived from fundamentalism often appear to be among the liveliest religious groups in America today. As already indicated, Albanese’s metaphysical religion has a multitude of contemporary incarnations, most notably in the exceptionally variegated New Age movement.

But this extraordinary spiritual pluralism returns us to the most salient issue for our investigation: How does the individual practitioner’s daily confrontation with the many potentially disconfirming others arrayed about her challenge her own spirituality? And how does the practitioner respond to that challenge?

Any consideration of the major challenges to belief in the modern and contemporary worlds necessarily entails mention of the much-debated phenomenon of secularization. Let us define secularization as it has most often been used by scholars, namely, as the process, beginning in Europe in the seventeenth century, in which the Christian religion gradually lost influence in Western society. While in the heyday of Christendom – that period during the Middle Ages in which the church had a potent influence over all dimensions of society – Christianity was simply inextricable from the larger culture, the modern period in the West has seen the church’s authority, at least in many countries, retreating farther and farther into the individual or private sphere. With secularization, religion is no longer the primary authority in arenas in which it previously held sway. For instance, it no longer provides us with our primary descriptions of how the physical world functions – that task

has been taken over by science – and it can no longer dictate how the economic component of society will be ordered. Religion, so the proponents of the notion of secularization aver, has been relegated to the private sphere. And even in the private sphere, religion and spirituality seem in some cases to be losing their power. Britain, Europe, and Scandinavia have all seen precipitous declines in both church membership and private expressions of piety.¹⁴

But what, exactly, lies behind the phenomenon of secularization? While it is naive to suppose that any mono-causal explanation could be adequate, one of the most frequently discussed potential causes is the rise of capitalism in the seventeenth and subsequent centuries, for capitalism's rationalizing dynamic empowered the economic sphere, allowing it to organize much of the rest of society around it. Religion, which had previously occupied that organizing center, was now pushed to the periphery.

However, secularization theory, as described above in terms of the rise to prominence of economic forces and the resultant privatization of religion, has become particularly controversial in recent years. That theory, in nearly all of its forms, assumes that institutional religion, and probably even what we have labeled spirituality, will continually weaken around the world as societies continue down the road whose starting point is modernity, and many proponents of the notion of secularization go on to assert that religion will eventually fade away completely. Yet, in sharp contrast to what the secularization hypothesis predicted, we seem to be witnessing the so-called "return of religion." From resurgent forms of Islam around the world to phenomena such as Hindu nationalism in India and the flourishing Pentecostal Protestantism in South America, religion and spirituality seem to be gaining strength rather than losing it.

But even if one interprets this present return of religion as just a temporary detour in the inevitable trajectory of secularization, one attributable perhaps to an unusual concatenation of socio-political forces that will not long endure, the spiritual situation in the United States has, for a much longer time, represented its own unique challenge to secularization theory. While it is true that the

constitutional separation of church and state in this country is compatible with the privatization of religion often associated with secularization, it is impossible to miss the ongoing salience of religion in the lives of countless Americans. Nor should we overlook the fact that the principle of separation of church and state is constantly tested. Hence the challenge to secularization theory: If the process of secularization is an inevitable byproduct of capitalist rationalization, why is America so apparently non-secular? One might opine that, while capitalism is, according to the regnant theory, supposed to play a crucial role in religion's demise, capitalists may be ambivalent about religion, in that it can be a powerful tool for social and economic control. Certainly Karl Marx did not completely miss the mark in his analysis of how religion can function in a society.

But where the peculiar vitality of American religion is at issue, sociologists have frequently responded with a different explanation, one that draws on capitalist economics to suggest how America has avoided the capitalist economy's marginalization of religion and spirituality, but that does not focus on religion as a tool of control. Religion's startling vigor in the United States is, they aver, a matter of market forces and of competition in America. In Europe and Scandinavia, there has traditionally been an established church, such as the Anglican Church in England or the Lutheran church in Denmark. But insofar as an established church is protected from vigorous competition, propped up by taxes and tradition, it is likely to become fat and lazy, to atrophy for want of any vigorous commitment on the part of its constituents. But in the United States, with its constitutionally prescribed separation of church and state, there is no one protected religious species. And because no one spiritual group has an automatic leg up on the others, each group must compete with the others to stay alive. Each must aggressively market itself. Hence the long tradition of proselytizing in American Christianity, as well as among many new religious movements in this country. While the Jewish community, given its longstanding suspicion of attempting to make converts, remains a holdout in this regard – at least this is true of the mainstream American bodies of

Judaism, namely, Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative – such apparently unlikely candidates as the Unitarian Universalist Society have now enthusiastically entered the religious marketplace. One can actually find bumper stickers triumphantly declaring Unitarian Universalism the “Uncommon Denomination.” In short, spiritual groups in America market themselves as aggressively as Ford markets Mustangs or General Mills markets Wheaties breakfast cereal.

If this analysis is sound, an analysis according to which American spiritual pluralism results in a marketing effort that keeps U.S. spirituality vigorous, then we must add it to the list of positive correlations between pluralism and piety, to be balanced off against our focus upon the potentially deleterious effects upon the most traditional forms of piety of confronting those who believe differently than oneself. It should be noted, however, that not all commentators accept the marketplace analysis as an explanation of America’s apparently unique ability to withstand the forces of secularization. According to Gregory Paul, for instance, this explanation:

owes much of its early acceptance to one of the greatest mathematical *faux pas* in the history of sociology. The statistical studies by Rodney Starke and Roger Finke that initially established the free-market competition theory of American religious vitality contained an egregious coding error: a key formula contained a -1 rather than the correct +1.¹⁵

He goes on to explain that

Even before that extraordinary error was uncovered, Mark Chavez . . . and Philip S. Gorski had published a devastating 2001 meta-analysis of more than two dozen studies alleged to support the free-market hypothesis, concluding that “the claim that religious pluralism and religious participation are generally and positively associated . . . is not supported, and attempts to discredit countervailing evidence on methodological grounds must be rejected.”¹⁶

We cannot say, for sure, then, whether it is in fact the free-market competition among religions in American society that has held off the full force of secularization on these shores. But whatever the role of market competition in particular in the perennial vigor of American piety, commentators will no doubt continue to cite that apparent vigor, whatever its cause, as evidence against the applicability of the secularization hypothesis to the American scene.

We should, however, bring a critical eye to bear on any credo according to which religion and spirituality have an absolutely secure place in American culture. After all, at the very center of our interest in this study is the notion that American spiritual pluralism may, in the long run, seriously undermine piety, or at least radically change it. The specter of the disconfirming Other is ever present. Hence, it may turn out that while American devotion has not succumbed to secularization – where secularization is understood in terms of the economy taking religion's place as the unifying center of the social order or, alternatively, as a weakening of religion due to other modern forces, such as natural science – that devotion will in fact eventually succumb to something else, namely, the individual's being forced concretely to confront a veritable chaos of spiritual perspectives other than his or her own, so that fatal seeds of doubt will be sown.

Now it will also be central to our thesis that the believer has a number of different options, some more intellectually honest than others, for responding to the challenge of the disconfirming Other. For instance, the believer can make strategic modifications to belief that may enable him or her to continue boldly to believe, modifications that defuse the Other's disconfirming power. We shall analyze this possibility in detail in Chapters Three and Four.

Still, it is certainly possible to find subtle signs of weakening in the structure of traditional American piety. That American piety might not be quite as secure as it initially appears, and that spiritual pluralism might be one factor undermining that piety, is plausible given a brief glance at recent empirical data. We must make it clear at the outset, however, that this empirical data provides scant evidence, if any, that it is pluralism in particular that is weakening

American spirituality. Rather, a glance at this data simply sets the stage for our discussion by showing that, whatever the causes, American spirituality is not without signs of being undermined. The “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2008” undertaken by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life looks to be the gold standard of religious surveys for some time to come.¹⁷ While the study is voluminous, a few brief observations stand out, given our focus. First, the researchers found that

More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion – or no religion at all. If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, roughly 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.¹⁸

While all such changes in affiliation bespeak the pluralism of the American spiritual scene, the large number of unaffiliated Americans amidst this pluralism is consistent with, though by no means necessarily indicative of, the claim to be explored below, namely, that pluralism can tempt the erstwhile believer into spiritual indifference. Among those 18-29 years of age, one-in-four claim to be unaffiliated with any particular spiritual or religious group. The survey found that 16.1% of all Americans are unaffiliated. And while 5.8% of Americans consider themselves unaffiliated but still in some sense “religious,” the remaining unaffiliated persons dub themselves wholly secular. Of particular interest is the fact that “those Americans who are unaffiliated with any particular religion have seen the greatest growth in numbers as a result of changes in affiliation.”¹⁹ Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout draw on other research to come to similar conclusions about the growing numbers of the religiously unaffiliated. They report that the number of adults who claim to have no religion doubled from seven to fourteen percent in approximately the last thirty years.²⁰

A second indication that American spirituality might not be quite as healthy as it first appears is provided by the statistics on Roman Catholicism. While the number of Roman Catholics in America has stayed roughly steady over the past few decades, that turns out to be largely a function of foreign Catholics moving into the U.S. population. In fact, to return to the Pew study, “approximately one-third of the survey respondents who say they were raised Catholic [in America] no longer describe themselves as Catholic.”²¹ Pluralism might well be one salient factor here: immigrant Catholics tend to come from less pluralistic backgrounds, and first-generation immigrants tend to be shielded to some degree from the full force of American spiritual pluralism because they use their religious tradition as a tool for maintaining their identity, which is threatened by the sense of being strangers in a strange land. But a full third of American-born Catholics, those who do in fact grow up in direct confrontation with the disconfirming other, end up abandoning their Catholicism.

The Gallup organization’s international polling only adds to the impression that, when compared to the spirituality of other lands, Muslim countries in particular, American piety is not as widely and enthusiastically embraced as an essential part of life as some might suppose:

The importance of religion [in Muslim countries] is reinforced by what Muslims say about their traditions and customs, which also continue to play a central role in their lives. When asked, “Are there traditions and customs that are important to you, or not?” majorities in many predominantly Muslim countries say “yes”: Jordan (96%), Saudi Arabia (95%), Turkey (90%), and Egypt (87%). This contrasts sharply with percentages of those [from a cross-section of persons from many religious traditions] answering “yes” to the same question in the United States (54%) and especially in European countries such as the United Kingdom (36%), France (20%), and Belgium (23%).²²

Jon Meacham, writing in *Newsweek* and drawing upon the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey among other polls and surveys, offers some further sobering data in his provocatively titled article, “The Decline and Fall of Christian America.”²³ He reports that “the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 percentage points since 1990, from 86 to 76 percent” (p. 34). In a *Newsweek* poll, 68% of the respondents said that religion is “losing influence in American society” (p. 36) What is more, “the percentage of Americans who think religion ‘can answer all or most of today’s problems’ is now at a historic low of 48 percent” (p. 36). Perhaps most surprising, “the number of people willing to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic has increased about fourfold from 1990 to 2009, from 1 million to about 3.6 million. (That is about double the number of, say, Episcopalians in the United States)” (p. 34).

In his article “Is God Coming Or Going?” David Ramsay Steele, drawing in part upon the work of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart on the relationship between religion and economic development, provides further evidence to bolster the claim that secularization is proceeding apace, not just in Europe but in the United States as well. Steele points out, for example, that responses to the Gallup organization’s frequent polls on U.S. church attendance “exaggerate [how often the respondents actually attend church] by up to one hundred percent. We now know that U.S. church attendance has actually been falling steadily, and averages around twenty percent – higher in the South and Midwest, but lower in the rest of the country. U.S. church attendance is about four times that of the UK, yet still, church-going is distinctly a minority activity in today’s America.”²⁴

There is another place to look for a subtle weakening of American spirituality in recent decades, despite appearances of its health. Popular culture in America has, in a span of roughly fifty years, gone from seeing “religion” as something essentially too sacred to treat with even a hint of irreverence (with undeniably important exceptions, such as the witticisms directed at religion by figures such as Mark Twain and H.L. Mencken) to a target ripe for ridicule. Think of Kurt Vonnegut’s 1963 novel, *Cat’s Cradle*, that

makes fun of religion as essentially a clever scam designed to make our lives tolerable, all the way up to recent comic treatments of religion such as George Carlin's book *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?*, Lewis Black's *Me of Little Faith*, the antics of Jesus and his fellow world redeemers on television's *South Park*, and comic and social commentator Bill Maher's 2008 quasi-documentary *Religulous*. Black captures the mood of many of those tempted to skewer American piety: "I think [religion is] taken too seriously, and anything that takes itself too seriously is open to ridicule."²⁵ The kind of light-hearted approach to a topic that would, in an earlier era, have more often been treated with the utmost gravity, is illustrated by the following passage from Black's book:

I feel [education is] more important than religion and, as it teaches the art of critical thinking, it can, under certain circumstances, even lead to religion. Religion, on the other hand, might lead you to education, but that usually only happens if you've been jailed and find Jesus and then Jesus says, "Hey stupid, get your GED, I can't understand you when you pray to me."²⁶

What is more, there is no escaping the fact that religious pluralism is a crucial component of the religious dynamics that Black feels need to be skewered: "While it is true that many . . . religions think they are the only true religion, the one true way to God and eternal salvation, this is all . . . absolute bullshit."²⁷ While these quotations from Black are taken from one of his books, he mounts the same kind of offensive against institutional religion in America in his stand-up routines, some of them aired on such bastions of contemporary American television as HBO. While Lenny Bruce's criticisms of religion might have been as sharp as Black's, consider the utter implausibility of Bruce or any other comic back in the 1960s similarly skewering religion on the *Ed Sullivan Show* or the *Tonight Show*.

Film too tells us something about our now relatively relaxed attitude toward piety. The 1970s brought us *Oh God*, with George

Burns's genial and thoroughly innocuous deity, hardly the *tremendum*, the overpowering force traditionally associated with the God of Western theism. In the 1979, Americans happily imbibed a highly irreverent British import, Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, about a hapless and unwilling candidate for messiahship born next door to Jesus of Nazareth, a film that went so far as to find humor in crucifixion. Things became even more wildly impious in the 1999 film *Dogma*. While the Swedes can look back to classic Ingmar Bergman films such as *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *Winter Light* (1962) for deadly-serious cinematic remonstrations of institutional religion, American (and British) filmmakers have become adept at comic treatments of a topic that would have been essentially off-limits before the 1960s.

In summary, then, an analysis of the state of religion and spirituality in the contemporary United States results in a mixed message. On the one hand, the number of different spiritual enterprises in America today seems well-nigh unlimited; spiritual pluralism could not be more in evidence. The multiplicity of pieties that surround us surely indicates that spirituality in America is far from moribund. But, on the other hand, both contemporary polling data and the irreverent attitude toward belief flouted in popular culture suggest that American religion and spirituality are also showing significant signs of strain, or that, though widely embraced, they are not taken nearly as seriously as they once were. In the chapters that follow, we shall interpret this mixed message as consistent with (but by no means exclusively caused by) spiritual pluralism's tendency to sow the seeds of its own undoing. Spiritual practitioners, sensing this threat, even if only subliminally, attempt to hold on to their beliefs through a number of different maneuvers, some of them merely defensive (we shall dub these "avoidance tactics") and some of them entailing creative changes in traditional belief systems (we shall call these "modification strategies"). It is these avoidance tactics and modification strategies that will take us to the heart of the matter. For while the juxtaposition that we have just undertaken of spiritual pluralism with empirical indicators of the weakening of traditional

religious and spiritual allegiances is, at best, suggestive, the investigation of the avoidance tactics and modification strategies will provide a window into the internal logic of belief and pluralistic disconfirmation that our brief consideration of empirical data cannot accomplish. That is, the polling data adduced above, as well as the examples of treating religion less than seriously, by no means substantiate by themselves the thesis that pluralism can fragilize belief systems. There is little indication within that data that pluralism is the prime culprit in the weakening of belief. The point of our adducing empirical data, then, is simply to show that spirituality and religion and American do have chinks in their armor that must have been inflicted by various causes, of which pluralism might be one. Hence we must venture interpretive judgments that go beyond what the data we have adduced thus far has provided.

Yet logical argument will not be our only concern. For while our investigation is stimulated by a logical dilemma – “How can I assume that my beliefs are sound when I have no better grounds to embrace them than others have for their very different beliefs?” – our interest is in a whole host of ways that Americans respond to that dilemma. As a result, we will, in addition to more strictly logical matters, necessarily venture into the psychology of belief, especially when considering avoidance tactics.