

Religion & Obsolescence Teaching Resources from Panelists

This episode will feature a special preview conversation about Christian Smith's forthcoming book, *Why Religion Went Obsolete: The Demise of Traditional Faith in America* (Oxford University Press, 2025). Christian Smith, William R. Kenan Professor of Sociology at University of Notre Dame, has been a leading scholar of American religion for more than 30 years with many agenda-setting concepts, arguments, and books to his name. Based on a new survey and hundreds of interviews, Smith offers a sweeping account of why many Americans have lost faith in traditional religion and why it can be considered "obsolete." Our conversation will address the book's main themes and findings, probe Smith's thinking about religion, secularism, and enchantment, and engage the many implications of the trends Smith outlines.

Brian Steensland (Host)

Website

Books & Articles

The New Evangelical Social Engagement, edited by Brian Steensland and Philip Goff (Oxford University Press, 2014)

Situating Spirituality: Context, Practice, and Power, edited by Brian Steensland, Jaime Kucinskis, and Anna Sun (Oxford University Press, 2022)

["The Role of Religion in Public Conflicts over the Arts in the Philadelphia Area, 1965-1997."](#) Pp. 103-138 in *Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life*. DiMaggio, Paul, Wendy Cadge, Lynn Robinson, and Brian Steensland. 2001.

["The Discursive and Practical Influence of Spirituality on Civic Engagement."](#) *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 61: 389-407. Brian Steensland, David P. King, and Barbara J. Duffy. 2022.

Christian Smith

Major questions his work seeks to look at or answer:

1. What sociocultural forces most strongly formed the gen-x and millennial generations that changed their views of traditional religion?
2. In what ways did the digital revolution---including the internet, chat boards, and social media---change the way people live that might have weakened the appeal of traditional religion?

3. Why might younger generations of Americans be increasingly attracted to "spirituality," neo-paganism, new age beliefs, esotericism, the paranormal, eastern religions, monster subcultures, and other forms of re-enchantment and occulture? Why were those interests hot in the 1960's counterculture and into the 1970s, but then seem to go underground, only to resurge again around the turn of the century?

Books & Articles

Religion: What it Is, How it Works, and Why it Matters, by Christian Smith

- Religion remains an important influence in the world today, yet the social sciences are still not adequately equipped to understand and explain it. This book builds on recent developments in science, theory, and philosophy to advance an innovative theory of religion that goes beyond the problematic theoretical paradigms of the past.

The Sacred Project of American Sociology

- *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* shows, counter-intuitively, that the secular enterprise that everyday sociology appears to be pursuing is actually not what is really going on at sociology's deepest level. Christian Smith conducts a self-reflexive, tables-turning, cultural and institutional sociology of the profession of American sociology itself, showing that this allegedly secular discipline ironically expresses Emile Durkheim's inescapable sacred, exemplifies its own versions of Marxist false consciousness, and generates a spirited reaction against Max Weber's melancholically observed disenchantment of the world.

Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart

- Seminal thinkers of the nineteenth century - Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud - all predicted that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the emergence of industrial society. The belief that religion was dying became the conventional wisdom in the social sciences during most of the twentieth century. During the last decade, however, the secularization thesis has experienced the most sustained challenge in its long history. The traditional secularization thesis needs updating. Religion has not disappeared and is unlikely to do so. Nevertheless, the concept of secularization captures an important part of what is going on. This book develops a theory of secularization and existential security. *Sacred and Secular* is essential reading for anyone interested in comparative religion, sociology, public opinion, political behavior, political development, social psychology, international relations, and cultural change.

Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion by Wade Clark Roof.

- In large chain bookstores the "religion" section is gone and in its place is an expanding number of topics including angels, Sufism, journey, recovery, meditation, magic, inspiration, Judaica, astrology, gurus, Bible, prophesy, evangelicalism, Mary, Buddhism, Catholicism, and esoterica. As Wade Clark Roof notes, such changes over the last two decades reflect a shift away from religion as traditionally understood to more diverse and creative approaches. But what does this splintering of the religious perspective say about Americans? Have we become more interested in spiritual concerns or have we become lost among trends? Do we value personal spirituality over traditional religion and no longer see ourselves united in a larger community of faith? Roof first credited this religious diversity to the baby boomers in his bestselling A

Generation of Seekers (1993). He returns to interview many of these people, now in mid-life, to reveal a generation with a unique set of spiritual values—a generation that has altered our historic interpretations of religious beliefs, practices, and symbols, and perhaps even our understanding of the sacred itself.

Syllabi:

[Sociology 20610: Sociology of Religion](#) (Undergraduate Course) Syllabus

[Sociology 63900: “Critical Realism & Human Personhood”](#) (Graduate Seminar) Syllabus

[Sociology 63664: Sociology of Religion](#) (Graduate Seminar) Syllabus

Fun Fact: I have lately been conducting micro-ethnographic field excursions at vampire balls, paranormal conventions, a rural pagan retreat, and new age stores, which included having to dress up and do make-up as a vampire.

Carol Ann MacGregor

[Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones](#) by Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, Robert D. Putnam. Published in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2010.

- This study examines the stability of religious preference among people who claim no religious preference in national surveys (i.e., religious nones). Using data from the Faith Matters Study, General Social Survey, and American National Election Study, we show that about 30 percent of religious nones in the first wave of the survey claim an affiliation with a religious group a year later. The percentage of religious nones remained stable in the two waves because a similar number of respondents moved in the opposite direction. Using various measures of religiosity, we show that most of these unstable nones report no significant change in religious belief or practice. We call them liminal nones as they stand halfway in and halfway out of a religious identity. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings on the controversies surrounding the rise of religious nones in recent years.

[School's out forever: The decline of Catholic education in the United States](#) by Carol Ann MacGregor. Princeton University ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2012.

- At their peak in the mid-20th century Catholic schools in the United States enrolled twelve percent of the school-aged population. In 2010, they educated roughly five percent of school aged children. ... Using extensive data from The Official Catholic Directory, the United States Census, and other secondary data sources, as well as archival documents and local newspaper accounts, I consider how demographic, organizational, and religious change have led to such dramatic declines in this key component of the private school sector in the United States. I argue that Catholic education in the United States has undergone a period of profound change that includes the breakdown of traditional organizational forms and patterns of behavior, the dislodging of belief systems, and the dismantling of governance structures dominant in earlier periods. I suggest that given previous literature that argues Catholic schools benefit urban minority students

and students whose parents have low education, these changes have potentially important consequences for educational inequality in America.