

Religion, Democracy & the Task of Restoring Trust

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There is a palpable sense of betrayal when religious leaders participate in moral malfeasance: when they engage in illicit sexual affairs, commit or condone child abuse, or deal in fraudulent financial transactions. Betrayals like these prompt doubts that religious leaders can be trusted and pose questions about the organizations they represent. But what can be learned from these episodes? I discuss the dramatic erosion of confidence in religious organizations that has taken place in recent years, framing it in terms of arguments about moral decline and institutional changes in religion. I show how betrayals of trust become symbolic representations of larger societal problems that are deemed to necessitate remediation. How the betrayals are interpreted becomes the basis for several mechanisms through which attempts are made to restore trust: confessions, investigations, and litigation. Their limitations notwithstanding, they cast light on the major challenges we face as a nation in seeking to restore trust in our basic institutions and our faith in American democracy.

At the start of the twenty-first century, few American churches were as powerful or as well respected as Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago. Its twenty-five thousand members, who worshipped at eight sprawling locations, were part of a televised global association that linked congregations across the nation and internationally. Thousands of pastors visited the church in person and online each year to learn the secrets of dynamic congregational growth from Willow Creek's founder and senior pastor, Reverend Bill Hybels. But on August 8, 2018, Willow Creek's entire board of elders resigned, and said they did so because they had failed to heed accusations of sexual harassment against Hybels that they now believed were credible. "We viewed the allegations through a lens of trust [in Hybels]," one of the leaders explained, "and this clouded our judgment." Said another, "Trust has been broken by leadership and it doesn't return quickly."¹

The breach of trust at Willow Creek was one of many such scandals among religious leaders in recent decades. In 1987, Pat Robertson protégé Reverend Jim Bakker, whose leadership, with his wife Tammy Faye, of the conservative Christian television program *The PTL Club* had earned a national audience, resigned following the disclosure of his involvement in illicit sexual encounters. One year later,

TV evangelist Jimmy Swaggart confessed to hiring and having relations with a sex worker, gave up his ministry temporarily, and then resumed preaching only to be accused of picking up a sex worker again in 1991. In 1999, Ellen F. Cooke, treasurer of the national Episcopal Church, was sentenced to five years in prison for embezzling \$1.5 million from the church and evading \$300,000 in income taxes. In 2002, *The Boston Globe* published the first of a series of articles detailing widespread sexual abuse by Boston-area Roman Catholic clergy, whose abuses were enabled for decades by Catholic bishops who repeatedly reassigned these priests to new parishes.

Concurrent with the Willow Creek investigation, in 2018, a grand jury found that Roman Catholic leaders in Pennsylvania had covered up the sexual abuse of more than one thousand children over seven decades. A few months later, an investigation of sexual abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention found that nearly four hundred clergy and lay leaders were alleged to have engaged in sexual misconduct. The following year, Jerry Falwell Jr., whose father led the Moral Majority in the 1980s, resigned as president of Liberty University after photos and stories surfaced about his (and his wife's) extramarital sexual relations and financial dealings.

Scandals involving religious leaders and their organizations are troubling beyond their immediate contexts and the persons most directly affected by them. Religious leaders are the experts, the trained specialists, the role models within their respected institutions and communities who may on occasion fall short of moral virtue, but are supposed to be fundamentally honest, trustworthy, and given to common decency. Scandals raise doubts about other religious leaders' sincerity and evoke broader questions about the ethical standards religious organizations purport to uphold. Trust broken is not quickly restored. Nor is mistrust easily contained. Confidence in religious institutions suffers when scandals occur too often, too publicly. Evidence suggests that confidence in religious institutions has fallen dramatically in recent decades. Gallup polling, for instance, recorded a decline in those who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church or organized religion from 68 percent among those polled in 1975 to only 36 percent in 2019.²

Not only has confidence in religion declined, but affiliation has also plummeted: the latest polls suggest that nearly 30 percent of Americans no longer identify with any religious tradition.³ A shift of this kind poses serious questions. Among these are whether the United States, which has long been the outlier among advanced industrial democracies in its residents' religious commitment and practices, is drifting toward a fuller embrace of secularity and, if so, whether that has implications for American democracy.

Indeed, there is widespread concern that religion's decline – and the decline of trust in religion – does not bode well for American democracy. Many of our deepest values – especially the importance we attach to human dignity and freedom – are grounded in religion. Thus, we need to understand why trust in religion is declining, what religious leaders are doing to restore trust, what can be learned from

the outcomes of these methods, and whether the strength of America's historic religious diversity is being weakened by secularity and polarization.

Trust is commonly conceived of as an attitude, a generalized belief, an implicit agreement, or an unspoken norm that bonds people together and facilitates the civic cooperation so sorely needed in a democratic society.⁴ But to understand trust we must also consider the events that sometimes weaken it – betrayals, for example – and how these events take on meaning as symbols of social disorder. In this symbolic role, betrayals of trust are events that evoke public deliberations about how they should be interpreted and what should be done to prevent them from happening again. The deliberations in turn influence the measures that are taken to restore the trust that has been broken. Many betrayals are private, affecting only a small circle of confidants, victims, and acquaintances; others have far-reaching effects. The Watergate scandal, for example, led to a significant decline in confidence not only toward the Nixon administration but also toward the U.S. Congress, Supreme Court, the military, higher education, the press, major companies, and organized religion.⁵

Betrayals of trust in religious organizations are probably no more frequent than in other settings, but these betrayals are particularly problematic because of the norms religious organizations seek to reinforce. These norms vary among religious traditions but generally include an ethic of mutual concern, such as is expressed in the Golden Rule or the injunction to show love toward one's neighbor; prescriptions favoring such virtues as truthfulness and sincerity; proscriptions against such ethical violations as theft and adultery; and conceptions of these ethical standards as being divinely ordained and universally applicable. Additionally, religious organizations provide both resources through which these ethical conceptions are taught and rituals that serve as occasions for bonding and commemoration. Moreover, the constitutional protection of religious liberty sometimes reduces the legal scrutiny and regulatory supervision of religious institutions and thus puts the onus on these institutions' leaders to earn the public's trust and police themselves. Exposure to ethical instruction and ritual observance of course does not guarantee conformity, nor does it imply that trust cannot be cultivated by individuals and organizations in the absence of religious convictions. However, the prominence of norms that are meant to facilitate trust within religious communities does imply that betrayals of trust are likely to necessitate repair work for religious organizations. In short, it is not only the frequency or severity of betrayals that matters but also how and how effectively religious organizations attempt to recover from these events.

In his examination of 1990s responses to sex scandals in politics and the entertainment industry, sociologist Joshua Gamson argues that the responses typically feature "institutional morality tales," narratives that deflect attention

from individuals' indiscretions and focus instead on institutional pathologies. "These institutional frames," Gamson writes, suggest that "*personal* behavior at first presented as 'shocking' . . . may be quite typical of those in the institutional *role*, that the individual *nonconformity* to sexual norms may actually reveal a sort of *conformity* to institutional norms."⁶ Especially when multiple scandals occur, the impetus is to generalize, positing reasons to worry that institutions are not as good as they used to be in recruiting the right kind of leaders, training them, upholding norms of integrity, monitoring leaders' actions, and punishing misdeeds: in short, feeding the erosion of trust in institutions. This impetus is driven partly by journalists' interest in making the story about something larger than any one incident, such as about the public's gullibility, the corrupting influence of capitalism, the superficiality of contemporary culture, insufficient attention to the problems of male dominance, and hypocrisy among proponents of traditional values.

Perhaps the tendency Gamson observes is present in religion as well. A scandal in religion occasions a cautionary tale not only about an individual but also about religious institutions. Willow Creek's response to the accusations against Hybels – after the board of elders resigned for failing to investigate the charges and oversee Hybels – was to determine what the church could do better to prevent similar incidents from happening again. Evangelical publications and websites in turn questioned whether evangelicalism as a national phenomenon had become complacent or insufficiently attentive to fleshly temptations. But the cautionary tale is not only about religion, but also cultural malaise. Religion is beleaguered and less influential, the narrative suggests, because of the broader culture's increasing secularity. The year following the investigation of alleged widespread sexual misconduct by Southern Baptists, in a thoughtful essay titled "Why I Am a Baptist," R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, traces the history of Baptists' preaching, doctrines, evangelism, growth, notions of citizenship, emphasis on separation of church and state, past instances of persecution for their beliefs, and decades-long confrontations with the corrosive effects of modernity. "An increasingly aggressive secularism, joined by forces aligned with moral progressivism," he warns, "renders all traditional theistic beliefs subversive and retrograde. The entire inheritance of Christianity and Christendom is dismissed as inimical to the project of secular liberation."⁷

The story of a church beset by "aggressive secularism" can be an appealing narrative with which to explain the dramatic drop in public confidence in religion. In this account, declining trust is the evidence that secularity is winning. The facts that nearly one in three adults is religiously unaffiliated and nearly half rarely or ever attend religious services – captured in polling report headlines such as "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace" – offer further evidence for this view of secularity's ascendancy.⁸ But secularity is not the

only possible explanation. The recent decrease in religious participation is concentrated among young adults and has been attributed to the economic difficulties young adults experience: student loans, uncertainties about careers, the necessity of changing jobs and retraining for different occupations, corporations' increasing reliance on temporary labor, and uncertainties about health insurance, often coupled with credit card debt and geographic mobility – all of which are associated with delayed marriage and childrearing. The life courses of young adults thus deviate markedly from the settled family and neighborhood lifestyles around which many congregations have been built.⁹ Were these factors not enough to explain young adults' disaffiliation from religion, researchers have also documented alienation induced by religious leaders who align themselves with political candidates and policies, especially on the right.¹⁰ This evidence on the face of it therefore suggests that religious leaders seeking to curb what they regard as secularity by engaging in partisan politics may be harming rather than strengthening their own institutions.

The alignment of religious leaders with partisan politics is reason to be interested in another aspect of the relationship of religion and trust: the politicization of trust, or as columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. has termed it, “the weaponization of mistrust.”¹¹ The question of trust with respect to religion is not confined to whether the public does or does not have confidence in religious institutions. The more pressing question is whether religion, especially when it is politically weaponized, encourages or discourages trust in other institutions: science, medicine, higher education, government, the media? The history of religion in this regard is quite mixed, as debates about the teaching of evolution, faith healing and scientific medicine, and antivaccination crusades have shown. Much depends on which kind of religion, which issues, and which context. In the current “post-truth” context, in which any statement can be called “fake news” – or denied having been uttered at all – distrust has become a political weapon wielded for partisan purposes, including by religious leaders.¹²

The idea that religion is beleaguered by aggressive secularism poses two important questions: Who perceives religion to be besieged this way? And who do they perceive the purveyors of secularism to be? Both questions are about trust, asking, in other words: Who among religious leaders are least trusting of the secular society? And which institutions do they distrust the most?

In a study published in 1998, sociologist of religion Christian Smith suggested an answer to the first question, writing that White evangelical Protestants cultivated an image of themselves as an embattled subculture.¹³ More recently, sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry have identified what they describe as Christian nationalism among a similar population of White evangelical Protestants.¹⁴ Although neither study is specifically concerned with trust, both imply that White evangelical Protestants are at least one prominent group within

American religion that is distrustful of the wider society – an implication, incidentally, that corresponds with studies showing that social capital among White evangelical Protestants tends toward in-group bonding rather than bridging with outsiders. Other groups, including Jews, Roman Catholics, Christian Scientists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Muslims have been literally and figuratively embattled within the larger society as well, but White evangelical Protestants have been of particular interest in recent decades because of their apparent influence in electoral politics. Their sense of embattlement has perhaps increased as well, at least if diminishing membership matters. According to one estimate, the White evangelical Protestant population declined from 21 percent of the American population as recently as 2008 to only 15 percent in 2019.¹⁵

The second question, of whom they distrust, is best answered with reference to the traditions of White evangelical Protestantism. These include an emphasis on the spiritual lives of individual persons and an ambivalent stance toward secular authority. The emphasis on individual spirituality is traceable to the Protestant Reformation in teachings about personal salvation and in practices oriented toward moral discipline such as temperance, sobriety, and marital fidelity. Ambivalence toward secular authority is expressed in the New Testament injunction of obedience to government, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to qualified obedience when government is perceived as acting in violation of a higher divine authority. Taken together, moral discipline and qualified obedience to governmental authority provide a basis for White evangelical Protestants to be distrustful of institutions such as the media and entertainment industry insofar as they are perceived to promote moral relativism and to be distrustful of government when government is perceived to act in ways contrary to evangelicals’ understanding of God. Distrust of government, though, is subject to partisan interpretation such that in recent decades White evangelical Protestants have been less trusting of Democrats than of Republicans, whom they perceive as allies on issues of religious freedom, opposition to abortion and homosexuality, and, as far as White Christian nationalism is concerned, opposition to racial and ethnic diversity and immigration.

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have illustrated religious leaders’ beliefs about who and who not to trust. As the Trump administration questioned scientists and health experts’ advice and issued misleading statements about the scope and risks of the pandemic, White evangelical Protestants aligned themselves with the president, with only 31 percent disapproving of Trump’s handling of the pandemic, compared with 65 percent of the general public who disapproved.¹⁶ One of the first U.S. religious leaders to die from COVID-19, an evangelical pastor in Virginia, for example, reportedly distrusted the media’s warnings about the seriousness of the virus and the importance of social distancing, believing instead Trump’s portrayal of a liberal media hyping the story. The man’s daughter re-

called, “I was frustrated with the way that the media was very agenda driven – and it’s on both sides. I feel like the coronavirus issue turned into something that was ‘party against party’ instead of one nation under God.”¹⁷ Most religious leaders, especially mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy who were subject to denominational authorities, and thus did not typically have individual control of their messaging to their congregation, heeded health officials’ warnings. However, defiance of social distancing and mask wearing increased as the pandemic continued, with religious leaders especially of large predominantly White non-denominational evangelical congregations challenging the authority of governors to impose regulations and, in some cases, questioning health officials’ credibility.

White evangelical Protestants’ sense of themselves as an embattled minority illustrates another important dynamic in understanding the relationship of religion and trust: “Organized religion” is not one thing, as survey questions sometimes imply. Rather, organized religion in the United States is highly diverse, varying in tradition, theology, national origin, region, ethnicity, and race, which means that religious groups hold varying levels of trust or distrust toward institutions and one another. These variations may not be expressed specifically in the language of trust, but are evident in the frequent conflicts that have characterized religious groups throughout the nation’s history, including tensions between Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, and among Protestant denominations and sects. The recent decline in confidence toward organized religion, therefore, is likely in part to reflect distrust of religious groups toward one another, such as White evangelical Protestants who distrust liberal Protestants, and vice versa.

Narratives about what has gone wrong when trust is betrayed tend to expand in multiple directions that reflect religious communities’ varied concerns. These stories can also suggest what should be done to restore the trust that has been transgressed. If we take as examples the Swaggart scandal, the Willow Creek sexual harassment allegations, and the Catholic sex abuse cases, we see three of the most common means by which attempts are made to restore trust. Swaggart tearfully confessed to his congregation and television audience that he had sinned and asked God’s forgiveness. Willow Creek launched an independent advisory committee investigation that emphasized personal discipline, accountability, and administrative oversight. The Catholic sex abuse scandals extended over such long periods, included so many victims, and involved such a lack of transparency on the part of church officials that many of the cases resulted not only in laicization of clergy and the resignations of bishops, but in litigation and criminal prosecution.

In none of these three cases was the means employed entirely effective. Following his confession and a subsequent incident of sexual misconduct, Swaggart’s ministerial license was revoked by the Assemblies of God denomination he was af-

filiated with, after which he continued to preach independently to a large audience of radio listeners and television viewers. They were apparently eager to believe that Swaggart was repentant, and that God was working to bring other sinners to repentance through him. Willow Creek's investigative committee, which commenced its work after Hybels took early retirement, concluded that the church's leadership needed to be more careful in handling sexual harassment cases, including instituting written guidelines and a third-party off-site hotline for reporting misconduct, but the flaws of these recommendations were exposed by another such case only a few months later. The report left it to the church's leadership to devise its own plan of action. The Catholic sex scandals resulted in monetary settlements with some of the victims, but the fact that abuse had been concealed so often without penalty or transparency left doubts as to how thoroughly the problem was being addressed; in surveys, many Catholic parishioners have said they remain distrustful of clergy and have reduced their attendance at services and financial support of the church.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, confession, investigation, and litigation in these cases were limited by the extent to which they carried enforceable obligations. They were also limited by the declining credibility of these very mechanisms resulting from cynical abuses of how they were meant to function: by insincere confessions staged for media consumption, from investigative committees producing toothless reports that languish in bureaucratic darkness, and by litigation that drags on for years before inconsequential penalties are levied. The efforts to address these particular scandals were subject to all these limitations.

Their relative ineffectiveness, however, did not mean these efforts were without positive consequences. The scandals became institutional morality tales that publicized the incidents, defined them as transgressive of institutional norms, and demonstrated that the institutions' leaders felt an obligation to do something about them. The Swaggart case was a cautionary lesson about accepting public confessions at face value and about the importance of truthfulness and accountability. Willow Creek's investigation similarly cautioned against putting too much trust in and giving too much unchecked power to charismatic leaders, while also serving as a lesson to other evangelical churches about the need to adopt clearer policies about gender equality and sexual harassment. The Catholic abuse cases, among other things, prompted wide-ranging discussions of pedophilia and new demands for clergy reform. Collectively the responses resemble what anthropologist Mary Douglas described in the 1960s as rituals of rejuvenation: they contribute to the renewal of the moral order by dramatizing concerns about purity and danger.¹⁹ Moreover, rejuvenation involves concrete steps that extend beyond the immediate discussion prompted by a particular scandal. Institutions are, among other things, arrangements of formal and informal norms that govern how people act and expect others to act in given situations. Restoring trust in an institution therefore requires clarifying and reinforcing these norms. Swaggart may have

continued preaching, but not under Assemblies of God auspices, which demonstrates the Assemblies' rejection of his behavior. Willow Creek learned that it, like any large organization claiming to be trustworthy, needed to have formalized rules about handling allegations of sexual harassment. Catholic leaders, with varying amounts of credibility, sought to demonstrate that they were capable of exposing sex offenders and cooperating with the law in punishing them.

What religious leaders have done to restore trust, then, is not so different from how other institutions, including our political system, attempt to restore trust. Evoking confessions of wrongdoing can seem impossible in the political arena, but public pressure to depose untrustworthy leaders is an elemental part of the electoral process. So are investigations and litigation, as those surrounding the January 6, 2021, insurrection illustrate. Although these processes are often lengthy and bitterly contested, they are the means through which we attempt to call attention to mistrust. And as the examples in religion illustrate, these mechanisms facilitate valuable discussions of crucial social norms, even when trust itself is difficult to restore.

The potential gains through confessions, investigations, and litigation notwithstanding, the decline of trust in religious institutions, coupled with dissension about who and who not to trust, is detrimental in the near term to the collective good. Democracy benefits when citizens trust one another and the institutions that make up civil society, when trust is sufficient to facilitate reaching out to strangers as well as acquaintances, joining voluntary associations, taking part in political activities, and working together for the common good. Trust that is grounded in religious convictions has long been a source of common values and a basis on which to build consensus. Even as religion sometimes inflames passions and promotes incommensurate ideas, Americans have historically conceived of it as a kind of civil institution that promotes agreement more than disagreement. It is understandable therefore to wish that more Americans held something like a common faith – even if faith were only belief in faith itself – and considered it deplorable when religious communities target each other, rather than work together to promote peace and harmony.

However, the dissension so obviously present among religious leaders today points to a feature of American religion that in the past – under the right conditions – has served democracy well. Dissension among religious groups provides checks and balances in the same way that divergent views between political parties and special interest groups do. America's "variety of sects," as James Madison termed them, motivated the separation of church and state. And the contending factions that have vied with one another have also limited the tendencies of any particular group to become a religious establishment.²⁰ Along these lines, legal scholar Kent Greenawalt, writing about religion and the politics of liberal democracy, suggests that trust is possible not in spite of religious diversity but because

of it. “If one believes that comprehensive views themselves are so diverse that one has little fear if decisions are reached by individual citizens and legislators in accord with comprehensive views,” he writes, “one might not worry much about their employment.” The reason, among others, is that despite impassioned and uncompromising religious advocacy, the reality of diversity can alter the standards of judgment on which political decisions are made and promote healthy skepticism toward political claims.²¹

Greenawalt is mindful of the fact that American religion – like American democracy – is pluralistic. In religion, as in politics, we are a diverse society. We agree on basic principles, such as the rule of law and the peaceful transition of power, but we disagree deeply about many other things. Political parties, special interest groups, racial and ethnic groups, and religious groups all contend with one another for power, rarely engaging in direct deliberations or coming to a consensus that resolves their disagreements, but bringing diverse ideas, arguments, and proposals to bear on policy decisions. Unlike in relatively homogeneous societies where common cultural traditions provide a basis for deliberative democracy to be practiced, the diversity of a society like the United States demands greater respect for differences and heightened expectations about the persistence of fundamental disagreements. The contention is messy and indeterminate, yet is the means through which a pluralistic democracy adapts to challenging circumstances.²²

From this perspective, democracy can withstand, perhaps even be strengthened by, the kinds of contention evident among religious groups today. Faith communities are organized along racial and ethnic as well as theological lines, often serving as the local centers in which constituents support one another, learn about issues of common importance, and facilitate their coreligionists’ access to information about leisure activities, schools, health care, social services, and opportunities for volunteering. The fact that faith communities disagree with one another adds incentive for them to advocate for their distinctive beliefs and, in many instances, results in mutual criticism and calling foul on adversaries’ tactics.²³ Of course, the winner-take-all approach that seems to have characterized White evangelical Protestants’ alignment with Republicans in recent years is regarded by many as a threat to the civil liberties democracy is meant to preserve. Yet the 15 percent of the electorate composed of White evangelical Protestants is countered by numerous religious and secular groups who hold differing views. The extent of this diversity suggests, as long-time observer of American religion Kenneth L. Woodward has argued, that White evangelical Protestants can hardly be credited with – or blamed for – electoral outcomes that in reality are the result of complex aggregations of constituencies and political strategies.²⁴ The diversity of American religion is also a significant factor in the debates – divisive as they have been – about the standards by which citizenship should be determined, elec-

tions should be held, and presidents should be judged. Long-standing advocacy groups such as the ACLU and NAACP have been joined in recent years by groups such as the Clergy Emergency League, the (revived) Poor People's Campaign, the Interfaith Center for Public Policy, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, Vote Common Ground, and Black Lives Matter as well as by local and regional clergy councils and lay organizations that advocate for immigrant rights, affordable housing, and universal health insurance.

Pluralism means that advocacy groups in religion, just as in politics, will take different sides on issues and will directly challenge their adversaries' arguments. Pluralism is also operative when advocacy groups mobilize constituencies with divergent interests, as illustrated by some faith-based groups orienting their efforts toward immigrant rights while others focus on homelessness, racial reconciliation, or police reform. Apart from advocacy, pluralism is the condition that encourages institutions to work to restore trust. Leaders of religious organizations are motivated to restore trust because, in the absence of it, constituents will vote with their feet, taking advantage of a vastly diverse American religious landscape and choosing to worship elsewhere, or not worship at all. Attendees at Willow Creek can decamp to a different church if they no longer trust Willow Creek's leadership, and college students can opt to study somewhere other than Liberty University if its board of trustees does not restore the institution's trustworthiness. An amendment to the concept of pluralism, then, is that religious organizations do not have to attack one another as long as pluralism provides the opportunities for constituents to register their dissent by moving their loyalties to other organizations.

But without a basic level of trust among the parties involved, pluralism falters. Profound disagreements must include at least minimal agreement about the norms of involvement. Disputants must treat one another only as adversaries rather than as enemies, and disagreements must be negotiated within the law through legislation, the courts, and peaceful confrontations. There must be a basic threshold of trust that those with whom one disagrees will play by the rules of basic civility, adhering to norms of honesty and respect for well-established norms of human rights and freedoms. Despite serious disagreements, America's various faith communities have in the past generally exhibited adherence to these norms, even to the point of arguing less exclusively about divinely revealed truth than in terms of procedures and practicalities. In surveys, White evangelical, White mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish respondents rate each of the other groups warmly, if not quite as positively as they do their own, the exceptions being colder feelings toward Muslims and atheists.²⁵ More to the point, religious groups with widely divergent views about religious freedom, abortion, homosexuality, conscientious objection, welfare, immigration, and capital punishment – including advocacy groups that have formed to press for particular issues – have, with only a few exceptions, worked to achieve their goals through lobbying, voting, and the courts.

The decline of trust in religious institutions has to be considered in terms other than the numbers documented in polls. Declining trust is an opening for religious and secular groups alike to fight for their convictions and, in so doing, clarify the operative social norms as well as the beliefs for which they stand. The fighting itself can be a good thing, bringing to the table alternative values and elevating the importance of clarifying those values. But it is the terms under which the fighting takes place that matters. The disputes must be conducted in good faith, expressing what people sincerely believe to be true and understanding that to disagree requires respect for those with whom one disagrees. The danger to religion, as well as to democracy, lies in cynical distortions of sincere convictions. Democracy is truly endangered when leaders refuse to believe that those with whom they disagree are worthy of the elemental trust that all deserve.

The task of restoring trust in basic institutions and of rejuvenating faith in American democracy is, at this moment in our nation's history, a high priority. Any hope that the United States can find common ground in the beliefs and practices that once inspired religion as a source of consensus is ill founded. The more likely scenario is that religious groups in alliance with or in opposition to one another, as well as in conjunction with secular groups, will either keep fighting for what they think is uniquely true or retreat into a privatized faith that encourages individuals to seek spiritual gratification in their own ways. Neither of these possibilities is very encouraging for the health of democracy. Especially when religious groups willingly dispute the basic facts of scientific medicine, endorse the false claims of political strategists, and deride people whose religious convictions differ from theirs – when religious groups fail to treat one another according to basic principles of trust and toleration – then religion functions more to facilitate authoritarianism than to support democracy.

For religious leaders to restore the public's and, indeed, their own members' trust in the religious institutions that have served America so well in the past, they certainly do not have to all agree on the important moral and social issues of the day. But they must be attentive to the basic principles within their own traditions of how to live amicably and respectfully among those with whom they disagree. Perhaps religious leaders can once again appreciate that their own traditions are strengthened by America's pluralism. And perhaps that realization can be a source of inspiration for upholding the underlying principles of law, trust, and common respect on which democracy is based.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Laurie Goodstein, “Willow Creek Church’s Top Leadership Resigns Over Allegations against Bill Hybels,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 2018; and Laurie Goodstein, “How the Willow Creek Church Scandal Has Stunned the Evangelical World,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 2018.
- ² Justin McCarthy, “U.S. Confidence in Organized Religion Remains Low,” Gallup, July 8, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/259964/confidence-organized-religion-remains-low.aspx>. Similarly, the General Social Survey documented a decline in “a great deal” of confidence in organized religion from 45 percent in 1974 to 21 percent in 2018; GSS Data Explorer, NORC at the University of Chicago, <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/trends/Politics?measure=conclerg>. To the extent that these trends were influenced by specific events, the two sharpest declines in the Gallup data were around the time of the Bakker and Swaggart scandals in 1987 and 1988 and the public exposure of the Catholic sex scandals in 2001 and 2002.
- ³ Celina Tebor, “About 30% of American Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” *USA Today*, December 15, 2021.
- ⁴ See the literature review and empirical analysis in John Brehm and Meg Savel, “What Do Survey Measures of Trust Actually Measure?” in *Trust in Contemporary Society*, ed. Masamichi Sasaki (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2019), 233–260; and the approaches discussed in Eric M. Uslaner, “The Study of Trust,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, ed. Eric M. Uslaner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2–14.
- ⁵ Everett Carl Ladd Jr., “The Polls: The Question of Confidence,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 40 (4) (Winter 1976–1977): 544–552.
- ⁶ Joshua Gamson, “Normal Sins: Sex Scandal Narratives as Institutional Morality Tales,” *Social Problems* 48 (2) (2001): 185–205, quote on page 198.
- ⁷ R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Why I Am a Baptist,” *First Things*, August 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/08/why-i-am-a-baptist>.
- ⁸ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.
- ⁹ These factors affecting young adults are discussed in 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).
- ¹⁰ Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67 (2) (2002): 165–190;

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- ¹¹ E. J. Dionne Jr., "Trump Is Weaponizing Evangelicals' Mistrust. And He's Succeeding," *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2019.
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- ¹³ Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ¹⁴ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- ¹⁵ Diana Butler Bass, "Nothing Is as It Was: American Religion Is Changing and We Need a New Story," *The Cottage*, October 13, 2020, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/nothing-is-as-it-was>; based on data from Pew and PRRI (the Pew data suggested a somewhat smaller decline).
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- ²¹ Kent Greenawalt, *From the Bottom Up: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39. On democracy and healthy skepticism toward political claims, see Mark Warren, "Trust and Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, ed. Uslaner, 77–97.
- ²² One approach that emphasizes contention as a feature of pluralism is Chantal Mouffe, "Religion, Liberal Democracy, and Citizenship," in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 318–326.
- ²³ Robert Wuthnow, *Why Religion Is Good for American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021) develops these arguments about religious groups' diverse engagement in public policy.

²⁴ Kenneth L. Woodward, “Religion and Presidential Politics: From George Washington to Donald Trump,” *Commonweal* magazine, September 1, 2020, <https://www.commonweal.org/religion-presidential-politics>.

²⁵ Jessica Hamar Martínez, “Americans Express Increasingly Warm Feelings Toward Religious Groups” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2017/02/Feeling-thermometer-report-FOR-WEB.pdf>.