

Chapter 2

The changing religious marketplace

Religion is more widely practiced in the United States than in any other industrialized nation in the world. The most widely publicized statistics are that 40 to 45 percent of Americans attend a religious service on a weekly basis while more than 90 percent claim to believe in a higher power. Other statistics put weekly attendance figures at 26 percent, monthly attendance at only 11 percent, and annual attendance at 19 percent (Harris Interactive, 2003). But even at these reduced levels, the importance of religion in America cannot be underestimated.

The vast majority (84 percent) of Americans consider themselves to be Christian, with 57 percent claiming to be of a Protestant denomination (Barna Group, 2006, pp. 8, 10). Increasingly one faith is not enough for many Americans as 19 percent claim that their faith practice is influenced by more than one religion (Gallagher, 1996). Moreover, “seven out of ten Americans strongly assert that their religious faith is very important in their life” (Barna Group, 2006, p. 20). Perhaps not surprisingly, this number is correlated with age. As we get older it seems that faith is more important to us. While researchers have found this to be true across all faiths, we can see it strongly in the number of Americans who consider themselves to be “born again.” The average age of the nearly 101 million adults who say they have been reborn is 50 (p. 29). Nearly half of Americans say they read the Bible weekly and an astounding 84 percent claim to have prayed to God in the last seven days (p. 40). All of this is to say that while people may not be attending church or synagogue, they do interact with their form of a higher power on a very consistent basis.

Compare this with other so-called first world countries. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project (2002), there is no other country in the industrialized world where religion plays such an important part in people’s lives. The percentage of people who said that religion is very important to them was 33 percent in Great Britain, followed by Italy, Germany, and France at 27 percent, 21 percent, and 11 percent respectively. This is compared to 59 percent in the United States. Eastern Europe was similar to Western Europe, with numbers ranging between 11 percent and

36 percent. In Japan, religion is very important to only 12 percent of the population.

In “less advanced” cultures, religious practice is much more prevalent. According to the same Pew study, in predominantly Catholic Latin America the percentages are the same as the United States or higher, with only Argentina coming in lower at 39 percent.¹ In Africa all countries had percentages higher than 80 percent, with the highest (Senegal) at 97 percent. In Asia the percentages are in the 80s and 90s, except for Korea (25 percent), Vietnam (24 percent), and the previously mentioned Japan.

So why does the United States look more like a less developed nation than the industrial superpower it is when it comes to its attachment to religion? Why have Americans not tossed religion aside like their European counterparts? According to the prevailing sociological theory of religion—the new paradigm—the underlying reason has a lot to do with marketing.

Religious institutions

Secularization theory

Before discussing the new paradigm, we need to set the stage with the old one—the secularization theory. This is the idea that as societies become more industrialized they will become less religious.² The advent of science and technology and the ability to analyze the world from an empirical perspective would eliminate over time the need for organized religion and its seemingly irrational worldview. Thus as religious institutions exert less influence in society, the need to attend church similarly decreases, creating an unending cycle of decline. Adults attend less church, and in turn their children have less religious exposure. This pattern progresses from one generation to the next until religion has little impact on the lives of individuals and then the broader culture.

However secularization is not only this. Secularization describes *both* the declining relevance of religion in society as well as how religion itself becomes more secular. In order not to lose out to the broader culture, organized religion changes to accommodate the culture within which it exists, taking on the trappings of secular institutions out of fear of becoming marginalized for not having done so. In doing this, it is believed that the faith will be simplified, syncretized, or in some other way diminished.

While that may be true, secularization is not a one-way street. Rather, secularization is a mutual process—the sacred becoming more secular and the secular becoming more sacred. Current day music is played in church, for example, but at the same time religious lyrics appear in popular rock music. The secularization theory interprets this give and take between the sacred and profane as negative because it threatens organized religion. Secular institutions will overtake religious ones, thus contributing to their

increasing loss in authority. But while that has happened, religion has not disappeared. Instead the secular and the sacred have continued to blur, each taking on aspects of the other (Ostwalt, 2003).

What we are really talking about, then, is the decline of *organized* religion and not the elimination of the human impulse to appreciate the sacred. In his bestselling book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris (2005, p. 40) bemoans Americans' tenacious hold on religion. Yet even this harsh critic of religion admits that:

[T]he range of possible human experience far exceeds the ordinary limits of our subjectivity. Clearly, some experiences can utterly transform a person's vision of the world. Every spiritual tradition rests on the insight that how we use our attention, from moment to moment, largely determines the quality of our lives. Many of the results of spiritual practice are genuinely desirable, and we owe it to ourselves to seek them out.

By this, Harris gives support to the point—organized religion may lose its appeal but that does not mean a person cannot advocate for his or her spiritual experience. Thus it was the limited definition of religion—religion as organized religion—that was a sticking point in the secularization thesis. People want to have faith. They want to believe in something. But the religious impulse is increasingly being satisfied someplace other than in a traditional religious setting, as evidenced by the statistics at the beginning of this chapter.

While the give and take between the secular and the sacred remains an important element of the secularization theory, the declining practice of religion has not borne out, at least not in the United States. Because of this, secularization theory declined in acceptance and scholars began to look elsewhere for answers. In the early 1990s a new paradigm—one based on economic theory—emerged for understanding what was happening in the world of religious practice.

Supply-side religion

The “new paradigm”—the supply-side theory of religion—claims that changes in religion stem from changes in the production side (the supply side) of religion rather than from the societal (or demand) side. R. Stephen Warner (1993), in his groundbreaking article, “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” provides a history of this economic point of view. Warner explains that “supply-side” terminology was introduced by Terry Bilhartz in 1986 and expanded by Nathan Hatch, who wrote about a “religious marketplace”

among “spiritual entrepreneurs.” Hatch stressed that the important point is not that there is so much diversity of supply, but that suppliers must serve the needs of their consumers—setting the stage for marketing religion. Warner further outlines the anthropologists, sociologists, and economists, including Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone, who have added to the theory. Their contributions include the ideas of free enterprise—religion operating in an unregulated market open to a variety of producers; and rational choice theory—people will select religion based on what best serves their individual needs or goals.

In “Supply-side Explanations for Religious Change,” Finke and Iannaccone (1993) explain that preceding theories “share the unexamined assumption that religious change usually occurs in response to the shifting desires and needs of religious consumers...[however] the most significant changes in American religion derive from shifting supply, not shifting demand” (p. 28). In a free-market environment such as the United States then, as supply increases or decreases, the market for religion should change accordingly. In *The Churching of America* (1992, p. 21) Stark and Finke demonstrate support for this theory. These researchers found that:

where many faiths function within a religious economy, a high degree of specialization as well as competition occurs. From this it follows that many independent religious bodies will together be able to attract a much larger proportion of a population than can be the case when only one or very few firms have free access.

Thus a robust market for religion exists when religion does not act as a monopoly. Further, there is a diversity of options for practitioners and more of these practitioners should be able to find a faith that suits their needs.

Many supply-side developments have occurred historically in response to changes in government regulation. Finke and Iannaccone list these as being: the parish system in colonial America, which allowed clergy to maintain a monopoly in the area where they served; “sustaining time,” an FCC regulation that required broadcasters to provide airtime to preachers in the early days of television;³ and the change in immigrant regulations in the 1960s, which allowed increased numbers of Asians into the United States, radically altering the face of religious products.⁴ As regulations were enacted or eliminated, the types of religious products offered increased, allowing for more religious practice than the secularization theory would have suggested.

Viewing religion as a product, rather than as a social mandate, brings considerable insight into understanding not only why religion has flourished in the United States, but also why it has been marketed historically as well as today.

The market model views churches and their clergy as religious producers who choose the characteristics of their product and the means of marketing it. Consumers in turn choose what religion, if any, they will accept and how extensively they will participate in it. In a competitive environment, a particular religious firm will flourish only if it provides a product at least as attractive as its competitors’.

(Finke and Iannaccone, 1993, p. 29)

Under this theory, religion is a product subject to the whims and changes of the market.

Breaking this down further, we can examine religion based on its attributes and benefits, which is how marketers look at a product. Religion’s attributes are written texts, a place to go on Saturday or Sunday, a source of information from a leader, and other tangible elements found in most organized religions. Its benefits are fellowship, interaction with likeminded people, a better sense of well-being, and, perhaps, salvation. At its base, then, one religion is not much different from another. The differences lie in the packaging—the music, the type of texts used, and what additional services are available beyond the prayer service (a food court? a large singles community? childcare? types of recovery groups?). Based on the options, consumers will make a rational choice about what compendium of services best fits their desires for a religious practice.⁵

In an unregulated market where the benefits for suppliers are high and barriers to entry are low, there will be considerable competition for these religious consumers. What this has meant in recent years is that clergy have taken on a more active marketing stance, promoting their product and changing its packaging to appeal to those who are seeking religion. This creates an unending cycle of competition because in markets where there is more than one player, competition increases consumption simply because more people will be able to find a product they like.⁶

However, you cannot create demand where it does not already exist, and this is where I differ in my thinking from supply-siders.⁷ Rodney Stark, a major proponent of this theory, has said, “The potential demand for religion has to be activated....The more members of the clergy that are out there working to expand their congregations the more people will go to church” (Porter, 2004, p. 14). True, the more people hear about different religious options the more likely they are to find something that fits their basket of attributes and benefits sought, and this, in turn, should increase religious practice overall. However you cannot drive demand for a product that people do not want. You can’t activate demand for religion anymore than you can activate it for a snow blower in the desert. Trying to artificially create demand for religion is one of the fundamental differences between religion and other marketed products and services.

In summary, then, religion operates in a free market in the United States with the number of suppliers driving the level of religious practice as much as, if not more than, religious demand. Because there is no religious mandate, each form of religion must compete with others (as well as with other discretionary time activities). An important way of remaining competitive is through marketing and promotion. Increased marketing means increased competition, which in turn generates more marketing.

Religious practice

The religious switch—after the 1960s everything changed

Historically religion has been an element of personal identity in the United States. A person's denomination was as much a determinant of who he or she was as language or social class (Warner, 1997). It is a factor that sociologists considered to be ascribed rather than achieved. That is, it was a factor determined by birth, rather than something you worked for. "This tendency to treat religion as an ascribed aspect of individual identity existed for the simple reason that it had roots in reality; a Gallup Poll taken in 1955 found that only 4 percent of Americans—one in twenty-five—did not adhere to the religion of their childhood" (Wolfe, 2003, p. 41). Thus, in the beginning of the last century, you were the religion that you were born into. Leaving the faith of your birth would have been a serious, well-considered action because it fundamentally changed who you were. Religious switching became widely acceptable, however, after the societal upheaval of the 1960s, the decade of the baby boom generation.⁸

Wade Clark Roof, first in his book *A Generation of Seekers* (1993a) and later in *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999), outlines how religious practice changed for baby boomers. While the baby boom cohort is not irreligious, they do not practice in the way that previous generations did. One-third stayed with their faith of origin, but two-thirds—66 percent—dropped away from religion when they were young, which is a huge number when you consider that only 4 percent of the general population switched only a decade before. While 40 percent of those who dropped their faith returned to some type of faith practice, the majority of those who dropped out did not have an ongoing connection with a religious institution (Roof, 1993b, p. 164). Rather, this generation moves freely from one faith practice to another. As Roof (1993a, p. 5) explains:

Many within this generation who dropped out of churches and synagogues years ago are now shopping around for a congregation. They move freely in and out, across religious boundaries; many combine elements from various traditions to create their own personal,

tailor-made meaning systems. Choice, so much a part of life for this generation, now expresses itself in dynamic and fluid religious styles.

Religion for baby boomers, then, is something they select through purchase and creation.

A number of factors have contributed to this marketing mentality. First, religion became voluntary (Roof and McKinney, 1987). This was due, in part, to the elimination of a stigma attached to not attending church. Second, the religion of a person's parents was no longer mandatory. Renouncing the faith of their birth was one of the many ways that boomers rebelled against authority. Finally, the influx of other faiths into the United States led to increased experimentation in religious practice. Many scholars have noted the changing landscape of American faith in the wake of changing immigration laws in the 1960s. However it is not just Asian immigrants, but also Latin Americans and other Hispanics who were affecting change. New immigrants added to the switching, or questing, phenomenon by providing additional, readily available alternatives.

In his book *The Transformation of American Religion*, Alan Wolfe (2003) notes that by the 1980s the number of Americans who left the faith in which they were raised was one in three (p. 41). Wolfe, like Roof, attributes this to the introduction of Eastern faiths, but he also includes the increases in intermarriage and in social and geographic mobility as part of his analysis.

Of note is the kind of switching that occurred. Seekers were switching from liberal denominations to more conservative ones. While Wolfe does not specify the cohort he is examining, it may well be that this switching is occurring in Generation X, the baby boomlet. In *The New Faithful*, Colleen Carroll (2002, p. 91) says:

Reared in a media culture that relentlessly lobbies for their attention and panders to their whims, many young adults find it refreshing when religious leaders demand sacrifice, service, and renunciation of consumerism. They feel strangely liberated by orthodoxy's demands of obedience and objective morality, which belie their culture's tendency toward individualism and moral relativism.

Generations subsequent to the baby boom seem to have achieved a level of decision burnout. Having been asked their opinion about everything since birth, they now want someone else to make decisions for them.

The other trend Wolfe discusses is the tendency for switching to occur within faiths. That is, Protestants remained Protestants but chose a different denomination. Economics may help to explain this. Using human capital theory, Iannaccone (1990) found that "people switch denominations in ways that preserve the value of their religious human capital" (p. 313), that capital being the time and energy spent learning a religion's rituals, doctrine, and

so forth. So, for example, it takes a lot more effort to convert to Judaism from Christianity than it does to move within Christian traditions, or even to combine one faith with another. Unlike Roof, Wolfe is conservative in his views. He is less tolerant of switching and sees religious shoppers as uncommitted to doctrine and unaware of the differences between denominations. However, he, too, sees that switching “is much better understood as a byproduct of...meeting individual needs” (p. 45).

Amanda Porterfield also pegs a free religious marketplace to social changes that affected the baby boom starting in the 1960s. In addition to the elimination of Asian immigration barriers in the United States, she examines the rise of feminism, the rise of religion studies as an academic area on college campuses, and the overall disillusionment with established institutions. First, she finds an important correlation between feminist and religious studies.

People interested in analyzing gender roles kept running into religion, as did people who wanted to change those roles. And people involved in studying or advancing religion kept running into gender. Beginning in the 1970s, it became increasingly apparent that religion played a major part in defining and sanctioning gender roles. It also became apparent that religion was subject to deconstruction as part of the analysis of gender in any given society. Advocates of changing, loosening, or expanding gender roles saw the deconstruction and reformulation of religion as a means to their goal.

(Porterfield, 2001, pp. 164–5)

Religion became open for analysis within the academy on two fronts—feminist scholarship and religious studies. In order to break feminine stereotypes, religion and its effect on the patriarchal social structure had to be thoughtfully analyzed. Breaking down these roles meant breaking down fundamental religious ideas.

Second, religious studies introduced new forms of practice to America’s college students, who took it as an opportunity to experiment with rituals and beliefs previously unknown to them. Instructors delineated between practice and the study of religion, which Porterfield claims contributed to the personalized practices, the pluralism, we see today (p. 203).

By involving many young Americans in studying a variety of different religious traditions and at the same time relieving them of the requirement of loyalty to any particular tradition, religious studies contributed to the rise of eclectic forms of spirituality characteristic of American culture since the sixties, to a lowering of barriers between religious groups, and to a tendency to tailor religious beliefs and practices to meet personal needs.

Finally, disillusionment with society and particularly the Vietnam War led many boomers to experiment with alternative religious practices. For some this included meditation and Asian traditions. For others it meant experimenting with the drug culture.

While the 1960s was a turbulent time in America, it was also a turbulent time for the practice of faith. Switching from one belief practice to another became increasingly casual and commonplace. This ability to switch also allowed for increased experimentation. Practitioners might switch multiple times or they might incorporate aspects of previously unknown faiths into their existing practice. From the provider's point of view, the religious institution was no longer guaranteed an audience. As religious switching, including switching to no practice, became increasingly acceptable, the need to use marketing to fill the pews also increased. As we will see, this did not come into full bloom until the 1980s and the church growth movement.

What do religious consumers want (how do they practice their faith)?

While it is difficult to describe what “religion” is in America today, it is possible to make some comments about trends in the way faith is practiced. First, religion has become increasingly privatized. Second, religion is voluntary and when it is practiced, it is often a faith put together by the people who practice it—sometimes that means switching faiths, other times it means combining faiths. Third, there has been a reemergence of spirituality that has coincided with a desire for a more personalized relationship with God.

Scholars and practitioners would agree that religion has become increasingly privatized. As fewer and fewer people go to church, fewer and fewer people recognize others as those of faith. Just as the secularization theory proposed, fewer people attend services, and it perpetuates a cycle of decreasing church influence. However this does not mean that people don't go to church. One of the few days on which we are aware of others' religion is Ash Wednesday, when suddenly people are conspicuous in their faith. In all places *Adweek*, an advertising industry trade publication, the following summation of our culture was described:

The day [Ash Wednesday] serves as a reminder that religious faith remains a largely unseen phenomenon, even amid the religious revival now afoot in this country. That is, unless you're part of the churchgoing contingent yourself, it's easy to be oblivious to the role religion plays in the lives of people—including your own acquaintances. You know whether a colleague smokes, watches *Seinfeld*, eats sushi, can't stand Robin Williams, wears Dockers on Casual Friday. You're less likely to know whether he or she is religious. As the separation of church and

state has evolved into a separation of church and culture, the topic just doesn't come up.

(*Adweek*, 1998, p. 16)

Religion—so far anyway—has remained the last taboo. We can talk about sex, violence, drug use, and finances, but religion is still off limits. That may change in light of the increasing level of religious content in the media, but whether that leads to a more public religious practice is yet to be determined; it seems unlikely. Therefore, for now, religious practitioners are by and large not looking to flaunt their faith.

Second, religion is optional, but when it is chosen it is a personal construction. Instead of accepting the religion of their youth, many Americans have moved away from structure to a more amorphous personal set of beliefs. Starting in the 1960s, Peter Berger suggested that religious choice is like a supermarket; in the 1980s Reginal Bibby called it a “consumer item” that can be purchased “a la carte,” and others see religion as a cafeteria—a place where you can pick and choose what you like and avoid what you don't. David Lyon (2000) has said that “religious activity is, increasingly, subject to personal choice, or voluntarism, and that, increasingly, for many in the advanced societies, religious identities are assembled to create a bricolage of beliefs and practices” (p. 76).

While most scholars are critical in their views about religious choice and merging religions, John Berthrong, in his book *The Divine Deli* (1999), makes a level-headed examination of the pluralistic religious practices in America today. While most theologians cry syncretism, Berthrong sees the combining of faiths as having been a part of religious practices throughout time. A good example he gives is the prayer bead: this staple of Christian practice was “stolen” from the Buddhists, though no one considers that inappropriate. Most critics pooh-pooh multiple religious participants, or MRPers as Berthrong calls them, but he does not see them as dilettantes or dabblers. They are not looking to replace religion but to “enrich and renew” it (p. 39). According to David Kinnaman, vice president of Barna Research Group:

Americans don't mind embracing contradictions, it's hyper-individualism....They're cutting and pasting religious views from a variety of different sources—television, movies and conversations with their friends. Rather than simply embracing one particular viewpoint, and then trying to follow all the specific precepts or teachings of that particular viewpoint, what Americans are saying is, “Listen, I can probably put together a philosophy of life for myself that is just as accurate, just as helpful as any particular faith might provide.”

(Kang, 2003, p. A18)

Stewart Hoover (2006) relates this personalized, privatized religion to the expansion of mass media and the ability of seekers to access a diversity of religious information, an idea that will be explored more fully later in this chapter.

Third, since the 1980s an increasing number of people describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious. Not only is this move to spirituality about renouncing organized religion, but it is also about a more personalized religious experience, a more personal relationship with God.⁹

Behind this shift [from religion to spirituality] is the search for an experiential faith, a religion of the heart not of the head. It's a religious expression that downplays doctrine and dogma, and revels in direct experience of the divine—whether it's called the "holy spirit" or "cosmic consciousness" or the "true self." It is practical and personal, more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological. It's about feeling good, not being good. It's as much about the body as the soul.

(Cimino and Lattin, 1999, p. 62)

This focus on the personal and the therapeutic has its roots in psychology. Says Roof, "We might even go so far as to say that the psychological is the mode of the religious in middle-class American culture today" (1993b, p. 167). Religion has become less about salvation than about feeling good. Even in the halls of evangelicalism, the tone is less about helping the world and more about how you have already been saved. In a 2005 interview with Tom Brokaw, Ted Haggard, then pastor of the New Life Church in Colorado and the president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), admitted that while they talk about sin in their church, it is not a main focus.¹⁰

The emphasis in our church isn't how to get your sins removed, because that's pretty easy to do. Jesus did that on the cross. The emphasis in our church is on how to fulfill the destiny that God has called you to.... making it easier for them just like Jesus did, just like Moses did.

(Dateline, NBC, 2005)

One of the places where this psychology arises is in the small group movement. These are no longer just 12-step meetings but any manner of group from Bible study to parenting meetings. These may happen in homes or within a church. In *Sharing the Journey*, for example, Robert Wuthnow (1994) examines the many small groups, or "moral communities," wherein people practice their faith.¹¹ A foremost sociologist of religion, Wuthnow claims that 40 percent of Americans attend these types of groups on a regular basis.¹² These groups are more private than church and they better reflect today's spiritual practice.

Religious groups that cater to one or all of these aspects of religious practice are the ones that are most likely to thrive. With the exception of evangelicalism, most faiths allow for private practice. Similarly while most conservative groups do not allow for syncretism, they do provide for a personal relationship with God. The religious consumer will be looking for one or more of these attributes—privacy, flexibility, personalization—depending on his or her wants and needs.

Thus far, then, we have examined how competition has contributed to a robust religious marketplace and an increased need for marketing. Adding on to that idea, we looked at how the freedom to choose your faith, and in turn switch from one faith to another, has further exacerbated competition because no congregant can be taken for granted. Finally, we examined how faith is practiced today and what “consumers” expectations are. Now let’s turn to how the ubiquitous nature of the mass media plays a part in changing the religious marketing landscape.

Getting out the message

Being able to choose your faith doesn’t mean anything if you cannot find out about religious alternatives. That is where the media comes in. As far back as the days of old-time radio, people used media as a means to learn of and try out new faiths within the privacy of their own home (Hangen, 2002). Today television and the Internet provide the same types of opportunities but in a more elaborate setting and with a more intense marketing message attached to it. The explosive growth in the media industry in the last 20 years has contributed to more religious content on the airwaves and through the wires. If you doubt the importance of media in the lives of America’s faith, know that “144 million Americans use some religious media—books, radio or television—at least once a month” (Winslow, 2005b, p. 28).¹³

A (very short) history of television in the United States

Television became a staple in American homes in the late 1950s. By the 1960s the three major broadcast networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—garnered more than 90 percent of viewership during the prime-time hours. This was easy for them to do because there was very little competition in most markets. Only large urban areas had additional channels like PBS and possibly one or two independent stations, that is, stations unaffiliated with a broadcast network.

The 1980s saw the broad introduction of cable. Cable had actually started in the 1950s as a means to improve transmission to homes in remote areas. However it wasn’t until the 1980s that the medium was more widely transformed into a means for disseminating original (and not so original)

programming.¹⁴ According to Nielsen Media Research, in 1980 there were 17.6 million basic cable customers, representing 22 percent of American television households. That number more than tripled to 63 million only 15 years later. With that increase, cable became available in more than 65 percent of American television homes (NCTA, 2006a). That percentage has remained consistently between 65 percent and 69 percent for the last decade.

Not only did the number of cable homes increase, but also the number of channels available to the home increased. By 2004 the average number of channels available in the home had risen to 132 from 41 only 10 years before. This growth in the number of channels has been fueled by the development of digital cable.

A little understanding of the technology here is helpful in explaining the sudden explosion in channel capacity. Limited shelf space—not being able to accommodate the number of different types of program networks available onto a cable system—had long been a bone of contention between cable operators (the company you pay your monthly bill to) and the program providers (networks like MTV, CNN, ESPN, etc.). When cable was first introduced, coaxial cable was used to transmit the television signal. These wires had limited capacity. Even before the introduction of digital, cable operators began to transfer their wiring from coaxial to fiber optic cable (some systems still use a combination of the two). With the introduction of fiber optics, channel capacity (or what we think of today as bandwidth) grew exponentially. In addition to increased capacity, digital technology allowed for the compression of the information being sent, which meant that less capacity was needed to send the same information. Thus:

more bandwidth + less needed space = room for more channels

This expansion relates to standard cable. In the late 1990s channel capacity expanded still further with the introduction of digital cable. As digital cable became more widely available, subscriber numbers increased markedly so that today 29.6 million homes, or nearly half of all U.S. cable households, subscribe to this program service. Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) technology improved in the 1990s and this service, too, increased in popularity. Non-cable video subscribers—for example, satellite users of all kinds—grew from a mere 2.3 million in 1992 to 28.3 million by the end of December 2005 (NCTA, 2006b). Cable and satellite services combined reach 92.6 million subscribers, or more than 91 percent of all U.S. homes. Therefore most U.S. homes now have three and four or more times the number of channels they did only a decade ago.

More channel capacity leads to more religious programming

As mentioned earlier, the average number of channels available in the American home is 132. If you have DBS it is many more than that—200 to 300 channels or more. According to the National Cable Television Association (NCTA), there are 390 *national* video programming services. Add regional and planned channels and that number almost doubles. When channel capacity increases, the amount of programming content increases in all genres—including religion.

A look through the NCTA database of programming networks is informative for this discussion. This database includes hundreds of channels of all types, from long-established networks to those in the planning stage. In terms of religious programming, in addition to large companies like Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN), EWTN, and The Word, there is a wealth of smaller and upcoming planned services. These include American David—“an American entertainment network with a fresh and unique Jewish flavor”—the Wisdom Channel, and the upcoming God TV, an import from England. Table 2.1 provides a sampling of some of the newer offerings in the religious television landscape.

Religious programming has become so important to the television industry that *Broadcasting & Cable*, the foremost trade publication for the television industry, puts out regular updates about this category of programming. In a special supplement for August 2006, the magazine promoted ten different religious or faith-based program channels including The Church Channel, Daystar, EWTN, INSP (The Inspiration Network), JCTV, Olympusat (a package of faith-based programming including some of the ones already mentioned), Smile of a Child, TBN, TBN Enlace USA, and The Word Network. This supplement was a promotional tool for these channels to receive increased distribution from cable and satellite operators. Each page contained the network’s mission statement, the number of subscribers, programming highlights, demographic research, marketing support, and contact names and information for affiliate sales and marketing.

The channels are Christian in orientation, though one or two bow their hats to other religions. The category has even spawned subgenres. The Word Network specializes in “African-American ministries and gospel music.” JCTV specifically targets 13 to 29 year olds and features music, sports, and reality programming, all with a faith-based undertone. We will likely be seeing more channels of this type. In an article entitled “Jesus Is My Homeboy,” *Broadcasting & Cable* outlined the increasing importance of programming for kids and teens in this category (Downey, 2006, p. 18).

One of the fastest growing segments in television overall is Spanish-language programming, and that trend has extended into faith-oriented programs and networks. The value of this audience is reflected in the growth

Table 2.1 Sampling of religious television networks

Ecumenical Television Channel (Regional – Ohio)	ETC offers its viewers the best in local and national religious and inspirational programming and represents all denominations including Catholic, Jewish, Protestant and Orthodox.
Familyland Television Network (National)	Familyland® Television Network targets families looking for television programming in line with their values and beliefs, yet not strictly religious programming. It combines family values-centered entertainment and original Catholic programming, 24/7, offering exclusive spiritual talk shows with a family perspective, as well as movies and other entertainment programs without immodesty, foul language, excessive violence or disrespect for authority.
God TV	Dubbed by many as the “ESPN of Christian Broadcasting”, God TV offers a younger, international dynamic mix of music, entertainment and ministry, catering to the 13–39-year-old audience, 24 hours a day.
Golden Eagle Broadcasting (National)	Golden Eagle broadcasting is America’s licensed provider of Family Safe™ television. The network offers programming from a variety of categories including religion, education, sports and family. The network began service in 1998 from the campus of Oral Roberts University. GEB is proud to present a good mix of the most popular Charismatic based programs as well as an ever-growing number of ORU-GEB exclusive events.
Oasis TV On Demand (National)	Oasis TV is a global television programmer of cutting-edge body-mind-spirit news, inspiration and entertainment. Program topics include spirituality, metaphysics, visionary arts, earth changes and the environment, personal growth, world peace, natural health and healing, new sciences, love and sexuality.
Praise Television	Praise TV is a 24-hour, family entertainment network with an emphasis on music. Throughout the day, the top artists in adult contemporary Christian music are featured through music video programs.
Shalom TV (Planned service)	A premium digital cable television network celebrating Jewish culture, Shalom TV enlightens and enriches the lives of viewers through meaningful, educational and entertaining English-language telecasts touching upon issues of interest to Jewish people.

Source: National Cable & Telecommunications Association (www.ncta.com)

of this segment of the population and their increasing purchasing power, which is estimated to reach \$1 trillion dollars by 2007 (Winslow, 2005b, p. 32). Several Christian broadcasters began Latin American operations in the 1980s and 1990s. As the Hispanic population in the United States increased, these companies launched channels to target it, among them EWTN Espanol, Family Christian Television, Maria Vision, and TBN Enlace USA.

Just a word here about Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), the world's largest Christian-themed television network. TBN is made up of four well-established networks: TBN, which is a lifestyle channel; The Church Channel, which is the worship channel; JCTV, which is a channel for young adults; and TBN Enlace USA, which is for Hispanic viewers. TBN's most recent addition, Smile of a Child, is a network for kids 2 to 12 years olds. It is "an enterprise lavishly supported by contributions from viewers around the world, where the 24-hour channel [TBN] is carried by 5,000 stations, 33 satellites, and cable systems" (Becker, 2005, p. 26). All of this is done without commercials. The company gets its support through donations and pledges, which explains why it is difficult to track the value of this market.

In addition to dedicated cable networks, religious content appears on secular networks. While prime-time series with religious content have their ups and downs on broadcast networks, religious content such as documentaries about Jesus and the holy land at Christmas time has been a staple for decades. In terms of continuing programming, the religious content is sometimes subtle, as in the case with the PBS children's show *Jay Jay the Jet Plane*, and sometimes it is quite blatant, as with *Touched by an Angel* and *Joan of Arcadia*, a prime-time broadcast network program wherein a teenage girl had weekly conversations with God. The difference in these shows versus some in the past is the separation of God from religion. On *Joan of Arcadia*, for example, Joan talks to God but God is not associated with a particular faith. Barbara Hall, the show's creator, wrote ten commandments for the show, one of which was, "God can never identify one religion as being right" (Poniewozik, 2003, p. 74). While for most of us that might be a problem, in the world of television it is required to draw in a larger audience. If God is Catholic, it turns off anyone who is not (an example is *Nothing Sacred*, ABC's short-lived series about a Catholic priest). One of the most successful shows on the former WB network was *7th Heaven*, the story of the tight-knit family of the local minister. Here, too, the faith was ambiguous. Over its history of more than a decade, it was the highest-rated show on the network (Chang, 2005, p. A1).

While *Touched by an Angel* and *Joan of Arcadia* are no longer on the air, religious practice and symbolism is still highly in evidence during network prime time even while God is not the specific focus of the program. In *Friday Night Lights*, a show about high school football in a Southern town, football players pray before games and after their star quarterback is severely injured. On *Cold Case*, a Philadelphia detective squad finds killers

in unsolved murder cases. At the end of each episode, the murder victim appears in a ghost-like form before the lead detective to acknowledge the squad's good work in finding the person who sent him or her to the other side. Even *Desperate Housewives* makes much of the Catholic faith of one of the show's lead couples.

On the New Age side of the spectrum we have John Edward, a television psychic who has had three shows on three different networks over the last several years. While the psychic genre is not as successful as it used to be, it has done well on cable with programs such as *Psychic Detectives* on Court TV and *Psychic Pets* on Animal Planet, and in dramatized form on shows such as *Medium* on NBC and *Ghost Whisperer* on CBS. One of the few successful serialized programs of the 2006 season was *Heroes*, a sci-fi adventure in which different characters can fly, see into the future, or even stop time.

While networks traditionally shied away from specific representations of religion, more recently Jesus has appeared in a number of prime-time television programs. On *Rescue Me*, a show on cable channel FX, Denis Leary plays a New York City firefighter whose cousin died in the World Trade Towers on 9/11. This very troubled character regularly has conversations with Jesus. More blatant (and less successful) was NBC's *Daniel*, in which Jesus appears to talk to the main character, Reverend Daniel Webster, who is a substance-abusing minister (Lisotta, 2005, p. 2).

It is not just fictional programming where we see more religious content. Religion has also increasingly appeared in news broadcasts and documentaries. "Over the past 10 years, T.V. coverage of religious issues has been rising sharply, according to a study...by the Media Research Center. The major networks broadcast 303 stories on religion in the year ending March 1, 2004, compared with 121 in the same period last year." (Charles, 2004, p. 11). The popularity of *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code* prompted network specials, such as ABC News's "Jesus, Mary and Da Vinci." National Geographic Channel had its highest rated show ever with *Unlocking Da Vinci's Code*, a success that spawned comparable programming on other networks (Becker, 2005). The last few years have also seen significant time given to the death of Pope John Paul II and to the Terri Schiavo case,¹⁵ and of course all the publicity surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*.

Religion has also received a lot of media coverage as it relates to politics. This issue presents itself in several ways. The religiosity of candidates has become a foreground issue because of George Bush's flagrant displays and comments in regard to his beliefs. This has forced competing candidates to profess their beliefs as well, which was seen in the presidential debates in 2004 and continues today in the lead-up to the 2008 election. Religion-as-strategy became a broader topic of discussion after that election when Democrats began to stress that they were not ceding the religious vote to the Republicans. Religion also arises in relationship to hot-button issues such as

gay marriage, abortion, and stem-cell research. This came overwhelmingly to a head with the right-to-life debate and the Terri Schiavo case.¹⁶

Religious programming has proliferated because it produces ratings. This increased level of religious content increases audiences' exposure to different types of belief practices, whether it is through the platform of news, drama, or televised religious service.

Religion online

Much like television, the Internet became a staple in American homes in very short order. While created in the late 1950s as a tool for scientific researchers and the academic community, once Mosaic was introduced in the mid-1990s with its user-friendly, graphic interface the Internet became widely accepted among the broader population. Still, it would be almost a decade before the widespread availability of broadband delivery systems, which would allow for complex content beyond the static printed page.

In 2000 only about half of the United States (58 million homes) was wired for cable modem capability. By 2006 close to 120 million homes had access to cable broadband and more than 27 millions households selected this high speed option, based on information from Kagan Research. Cable modems were not the only means for increasing broadband capacity. DSLs (digital subscriber lines) have also made significant inroads into American homes. As of March 2006, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2006), about 42 percent of Americans have broadband in the home, which enables them to access video content via the Internet.

So what does all of this expansion in technology mean in relationship to our discussion? First, people can interact with religious content continuously. Unlike television where the viewer has to wait for their favorite show to be programmed, the Internet is available 24 hours a day. Broadband allows for the transmission of video, which is widely in evidence on religious sites and makes them more appealing than the static sites of old. Sites associated with popular televangelists have streaming video available for viewing, for example. This is usually much-expanded content from what is available on television, so even though you can watch Joel Osteen's 30-minute program across the country on Sunday morning, you can view the full service (usually an hour or more) online any time of the day, any day of the week. (This will be covered more fully in subsequent chapters.) Second, there are thousands of sites to choose from. Many churches have an online presence, which allows parishioners (and nonmembers as well) to view information about their organizations. In 2001 Barna found that one in three churches had Web sites (Seybert, 2004, p. 18). By 2005 close to 60 percent of Protestant churches had a Web site, representing an increase of 68 percent (Barna Group, 2005). Third, like books and radio, the Internet enables people to test out new faiths—an abundance of new faiths—in private. In 2001 Barna

projected “that within this decade as many as 50 million individuals may rely solely upon the Internet to provide all of their faith-based experiences” (Barna Group, 2001). This has not yet happened, but given practitioners propensity for private practice it may still come to pass. Finally, there are opportunities for community online that other forms of media cannot provide and that allow for additional means by which the Internet can provide privatized practice.

Even before the advent of widely available high-speed Internet connections, people were readily going online to retrieve spiritual and religious information. In 2004, Hoover *et al.* found that “64% of wired Americans have used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes.” These religious purposes included e-mail exchanges, reading news accounts about religion, finding out about religious services, and inquiring about holiday celebrations. These researchers also found that people did not use the Internet as their primary form of faith practice but to supplement their offline experiences. Elena Larsen (2004) noted that “more than 3 million people a day get religious or spiritual material” (p. 17) from the Internet. Most use the Internet for solitary purposes rather than interaction with others in this capacity. In light of our discussion, it is interesting to note that while 67 percent of “religious surfers”—Americans who use the Internet to find religious information—accessed information about their own faith, fully 50 percent accessed information about other faiths (p. 18). Perhaps not surprisingly, religious converts are active Internet users, as they use this technology to learn more about their new faith practice.

The Web is also a source for shopping for religious products. Both secular and religious marketers readily use the Internet. Amazon.com, for example, has a special section just for Christian products. As for religious content sites, there are of course thousands of them. Religious retailers sell everything from books to gifts to music to clothing. There are Web sites for all types of practitioners, from AllBibles.com to ChristianBook.com to Spreadtheword.com. More varied content can be found on iExalt.com, which provides chat rooms and movie and book reviews as well as a “Bible Question of the Day” newsletter; parable.com, which is an extensive religious product search engine; and iBelieve.com, which provides recipes in addition to links to Christian commerce sites (Seybert, 2004, p. 19).

While television has historically been the mass purveyor of information about religion, the Internet now adds to the dissemination of religious content. The Internet’s key advantages over television include the wealth of information it provides, the 24-hour availability of user-selected content, and the ability it offers users to interact with others of faith either through chat rooms or e-mail. From a marketing perspective, it provides sales opportunities that are fast, customizable, and private.

Conclusion

The marketplace for religious practice has changed because people are free to choose their religion. You can stay with a single faith community for a week, a year, or a decade, or you can attend multiple faith communities simultaneously. Just as it is easier to leave a marriage now than it was 50 years ago, so, too, is it easier to leave your faith community—it's just not that big a deal. In addition, in our consumer culture we have been trained through years of advertising and marketing messages to think in terms of planned obsolescence. This has led to the prevailing belief that for every possession there is something to replace it that is “new and improved.” There's always a better iPod, a better microwave, a better husband. Why shouldn't there be a better church, or one that better suits our needs at a particular point in time? Thus it is not just that we can choose our belief system, but that we have a propensity to leave it the minute it doesn't suit our needs.

It is not enough to be released to choose our faith. There also have to be mechanisms in place whereby people can readily and easily find out about possible alternatives. If I don't have to be Catholic but I can't find out about Buddhism, for example, or if I can find out about it but there's no way for me to put my faith into practice, then change is unlikely to occur. But with the introduction of electronic media into the home, information about different religions became available. Specifically, it was the advent of digital television and the Internet in the 1990s that made religious information ubiquitous and plentiful. This abundance of information created an environment in which people could readily create their understanding of truth with a capital T by selecting aspects of multiple faiths and combining them, or by switching from one faith to another to find what best suits their needs.

The ability to choose on the part of the seeker has made the religious marketplace more competitive. Monopoly practices no longer apply because churches cannot take their parishioners for granted. Marketing becomes the means to attract new parishioners as well as retain current ones.

In addition, churches are not competing with just other brick and mortar churches. They are competing with electronic and virtual churches. These “churches” more readily suit the marketing model because they enable seekers to decide not only where to practice, but also when to practice and how to practice, thus freeing religion from time and space. Easily accessible media with a plethora of alternative religious content allows people to practice their faith in the privacy of their own homes (and now with podcasts, anywhere they happen to be). While reading a Bible at home has been commonplace for centuries, it is only in the last decade that people can find almost any information about any belief practice they want 24 hours a day. Television is in 99 percent of American homes, with the majority of these having access to cable and/or satellite, which provide multiple outlets of religious programming. The Internet offers virtually unlimited content

that users can access as they see fit. Users can tailor content choices to get “what I want, when I want it”—the goal of any consumer product or service provider.

Moreover, in recent years, religious content has also gotten qualitatively better. Today’s televangelists are as well produced as any prime-time television production. Online content is unlimited and continuously available. We can pray, worship, exchange ideas, or take a class any time of the day or night. So, in order to compete with these consumer-oriented choices, churches have to cater to consumers more aggressively, since minimally they are asking religious practitioners to leave their homes to be part of their community. Religious institutions have to make the trip worthwhile.

In aggressively entering the market for leisure time activities (because that is really the category we’re talking about), religious organizations find themselves having to take on more and more of the marketing elements used by the culture at large. How else to compete against television, video games, time with the family, sports, and everything else that occupies the lives and minds of Americans today? Beyond the issue of content, which will be discussed later, is the issue of giving up their expertise. Community, stability, and a foundational belief system are the elements of a religious organization’s unique selling proposition—the things they have that no one else can offer. Most religious organizations have not found a way to capitalize on these assets. This is evidenced in that for most people (60 percent or more) religion is not experienced within community on a regular basis. Rather, worship as part of a group occurs a couple of times a year. The exception here is megachurches, which we will look at later in this book. These jumbo churches offer a multitude of activities, both religious and secular, that provide myriad opportunities for community, fellowship, and personal connection.