

## THE 1950s: CHANGES IN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOSITY IN THE UNITED STATES?

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### Abstract

Despite all the modernity of the United States, American religious life has maintained an intensity that European believers can only dream of. Historians of the twentieth century often state that American traditional Christian religiosity rose significantly in the 1950s, but sociological researches cannot prove the fact. The reason why historians and sociologists diverge in their opinions on possible increases in religiosity may dwell in the fact that both process different kind of data. When we harmonize them, it seems that the 1950s present no victory of traditional religious form over modernity. More than great change in religious life of individuals, the 1950s can be characterized by increased visualization of religious themes in public.

**Keywords:** religiosity, change, traditional, United States, 1950s, modernity

### Tradition and Modernity

It seems that the second half of the twentieth century had been times of a distinct conflict between tradition and modernity. Tradition was represented by old ways and morals, by religion of forefathers, by the faith in God as the supreme ruler of this world and the only one who is truly good and wise in his nature. Modernity, on the contrary, declared faith in the goodness of man. Man and his reason became the measure of all things. A notable trait of this era is calling one religious tradition into question from another tradition's perspective, as well as questioning all traditions from a modern perspective. Modernity is then called into question by

those who support a return to tradition. The conflict between tradition and modernity brings about the establishment of a multicultural society that integrates individuals brought up in different traditions and modernity's supporters; on the other hand, it also foments religious fundamentalism and an imaginary "clash of civilizations."

Sociologists tended to see general correlation between growing secularization of a society and its modernity. But the United States could not fit this theoretical model. The United States is modern society that is still keeping high level of religiosity. Therefore sociologists tried to examine American religiosity by comparing it to European. Finally they suggested that American religious denominations went through set of inner changes that enabled them to remain relevant for modernizing society.<sup>1</sup> In contrary, the European denominations did not go through such a deep transformation. As a consequence the European societies became more secular.

In the history of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century we can notice at least two periods of increase in traditional religious practices. They are the 1950s and 1980s. Especially the 1950s are considered to be a boom of traditional Christian denominations in the United States. The question is: "Did traditional American religiosity really grow so much in the 1950s? Did it really loose in its fight with modernity in the two following decades?"

The theme of American religiosity has been examined very well and very thoroughly, especially in American publications. This is due to the importance that Americans bestow on religion and the fact that religiosity in the United States is the subject of commercial endeavors, such as pre-election polls, the sale of religious literature, as well as individual preachers' efforts to advertise themselves and make themselves visible.

In his works titled *Crossroads of American Religious Life* and *The Sixties' Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern*,<sup>2</sup> historian Robert S. Ellwood extensively describes the development of American religiosity in two periods which he considers crucial to

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Luckmann, "The Decline of Church-Oriented Religion", in *Sociology of Religion*, ed. Roland Robertson (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 141-151.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, *1950: Crossroads of American Religious Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties' Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

understanding contemporary American religious life. The history of American religiosity has also been compiled by Edwin Gaustad,<sup>3</sup> among others. A large quantity of scholarly works has been dedicated to examining the electoral behavior of American believers and the mutual influence the political and religious aspects of American life have on one another.<sup>4</sup> With a certain hyperbole, it can be said that every expert researching the spiritual life of Americans has a slightly different opinion on its development and present state and arrives at different conclusions in their analyses. What may be seen as a sign of the declining importance of religiosity in American life by one may be understood as a mere episode that lacks an adequately informative value by another. Therefore, conclusions regarding the decrease, or increase, of religion's influence on Americans are always tinged with a certain degree of subjectivity.

That is why the book *Religious Change in America* by Andrew M. Greeley excels in the works focusing on American religiosity.<sup>5</sup> It is a summary of sociological studies conducted in the United States using the same set of test questions from the 1940s up to now. There is also a summary of results from previous studies; however, these used different questions and it is possible that the methodology of their processing, or of forming the questions themselves, were not preserved. Therefore, studies conducted prior to the 1940 are presented only as a means of illustrative comparison. A declarative value is attributed only to those questions that remained unchanged from the 1940s to the 1980s. This is the only way to ensure that the maximum declarative value is achieved when summarizing all of the studies. Owing to this methodology, objectivity and research only of facts that are sociologically and statistically measurable, this publication makes an exceptional contribution to research pertaining to changes in the religious behavior of Americans.

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<sup>3</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *A Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1865* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Corbett, Julia Mitchell Corbett, *Politics and Religion in the United States* (New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1999); James L. Guth, John C. Green, eds., *The Bible and the Ballot Box: Religion and the Politics in the 1988 Election* (New York, Westview Press, 1991); Martin E. Marty et al., eds., *Religion in American Public Life: Living with Our Deepest Differences* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001); Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power interests and Conflicts in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); V. L. Warren, *Pulpit Politics* (New York: SUNY Press, Albany, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Committee on Social Indicators, Social Science Research Council, Harvard University Press, 1996).

Chester Gillis' book *Roman Catholicism in America* documents the development of and changes in the American Catholic Church, which is the biggest religious organization in the United States.<sup>6</sup> This book's importance lies in the fact that the Catholic Church, which was considered to be some kind of foreign element in the predominantly Protestant United States, went through a vast process of emancipation in the second half of the twentieth century and most Americans stopped perceiving it as something alien. This in itself is one of the fundamental changes in American religiosity.

## **Theoretical Approaches towards the Development of American Religiosity in the Twentieth Century**

According to the evidently prevailing opinion of the social sciences, since the era of Enlightenment, i.e., the beginning of the conflict between science and religion, religious faith has been diminishing gradually at a rate that is directly proportional to the rate at which new scientific knowledge has been acquired and at which general education has progressed. Many studies about religion proceed on the assumption that people are not as grounded in religion as they were before. All indicators of a person's religious conduct should therefore give evidence of religion's declining importance in that person's life. However, American sociologists who specialize in religion started to question this assumption in the 1980s. In principle, there are currently five main models regarding the development of American religiosity in the twentieth century, namely the secularization, cyclical, episodic, stability, and growth model.

The secularization model is based on an assumption shared by many social scientists.<sup>7</sup> In their opinion, the religious faith of western, urbanized and industrialized peoples has been dying. The world these people live in has been stripped of its myths and so it must be science that emerges victorious from its long struggle with religion.

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<sup>6</sup> Chester Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Notion of necessary and unavoidable secularization of a modern society was common to most sociologists since the early era of this discipline. Europe was held to be the "cradle" of the secularization theory that was most vividly formulated by Peter Berger in his book *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967). However, facing the raw data disproving the theory, Peter Berger later revoked his secularization theory in another book *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).

Proponents of the cyclical model have noticed that in the United States religion has survived well beyond its predicted demise on numerous occasions. According to this model, religious life, similar to the global economy, goes through “boom-and-bust” cycles. Based on this model, America’s religious “boom” periods spanned the 1950s and the 1980s, the eras of Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan, respectively.

The episodic event model is based on the assumption that changes in religion are induced by a singular event that never occurs again. These changes can then be short-term or long-term. The influence of the Second Vatican Council on American Catholicism can be regarded as an example of such a singular event.

The stability model underlines the immutability of a system of symbols and values and of the most fundamental questions that a believer asks. In this case, religion is perceived as a relatively invariable dimension of human life.<sup>8</sup>

The growth model is the last one. Although it seems to be the least probable variant, this theory examines the possibility of an increase in religiosity in general. Although this model is often presented in a purely academic light, we can speculate about its application in case studies of an arbitrary long-term political crisis accompanied by the threat of nuclear destruction of the world. Stress induced by such a protracted menace could then rouse a nation’s inhabitants to intensify their faith in religion.

Owing to its history of immigration, the United States is home to nearly all of the world’s religions. Mapping their development and place in American society, however, exceeds the scope of this work. It is also only possible to monitor the general development of trends in American religiosity through the religions and churches that most Americans belong to. According to Andrew M. Greeley, corresponding statistics required to evaluate American religious cultures only exist for two categories of believers: Catholics and Protestants. The amount of analytical data that reflects the culture of American Catholics is even greater than the amount of data that reflects Protestant culture. According to Greeley, Protestantism has remained practically unchanged over the last fifty years, whereas Catholicism has been subjected to major transformations that have been linked to changes in the socio-economic status of its adherents. American sociologists have three primary sources of data that catalogues changes in the religious life of the USA: the

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<sup>8</sup> C. Geertz brings evidence for the stability model. See Clifford Geertz, *Myth, Symbol and Culture* (New York: Norton, 1973).

Gallup Organization (AIPO; The American Institute of Public Opinion), the Survey Research Centre of the University of Michigan (SRC), and the National Opinion Research Centre of the University of Chicago (NORC). These sources process data that pertains to the following denominations: Catholicism and the Baptist and Methodist movements.<sup>9</sup>

One fourth of America's population is Catholic, one fifth is Baptist and one sixth is Methodist. These are the key denominations in the evaluation of general trends within the population. Information about other, smaller groups can provide important supplementary information about and illustrations of trends that are being examined; however, they cannot be processed in a representative manner on a nationwide level. Further difficulties arise when processing the representative data. Emphasis must be placed on inserting this data into wider-ranging transformations that are taking place in the society being studied, then evaluating it carefully. For example, an apparent decrease of American religiosity, proven by a measurable decline in attendance at church services in the late 1960s and early 1970s, could have been caused by the life cycle of the generation that was born in huge numbers after the war (the so-called "baby boomers"). That is to say, young people are generally less religiously active than their elders. It is then necessary to distinguish the actual behavioral change from the life cycle manifestation of influential age groups that will turn to religion and its values at a later age.<sup>10</sup>

The question that still remains is how to examine, and possibly measure, slight changes in the field of religion that are less tangible than church service attendance. How does a people's willingness to practice their religion change? How does a people's concept of God Himself change? With regards to the complexity of the theme, I will compare publications devoted to American religiosity and so-called "objectively measurable" findings by Andrew M. Greeley. The result should harmonize both.

## The Vestiges of 1930–1945

Vast changes in the religious lives of modern Americans, as well as Europeans, were to be expected after the end of the Second World War, which, to a large extent, had shattered all of the worlds past certainties. It

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge, MA: Committee on Social Indicators, Social Science Research Council, Harvard University Press, 1989), 8–9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–26.

is therefore interesting to look at religious life as it had existed during the years preceding the conflict, which itself had sprung from the events of the 1930s. It can be said that Great Depression in particular had a significant impact on American religiosity.

Influential theologians and thinkers Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth inspired religious thinking in the USA in the 1930s. Niebuhr, the liberal author of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932, even separated the social utopia on which several of his contemporaries had laid their hopes from Marxism. Niebuhr emphasized that man would never be a fully rational creature; therefore, there had to be a place in his life for something that forced him to do good deeds. In his work, Karl Barth also alluded to a theological crisis connected with a disappointment in liberalism and its supposedly overly simplified vision of natural religion and human perfection. Barth's dialectical theology, also known as crisis theology, seemed to have a future as it illuminated the imperfections of this world and mankind and, subsequently, the existing state of suffering. Barth highlighted the ultimate difference between God and humanity. Purified by the sufferings of the First World War, Barth's school of theology preached that man could not find God on his own and therefore had to find God through the Holy Scripture, which was being conveyed to him with an insight that only faith could reveal.<sup>11</sup>

From practical point of view, it can be said that American religiosity was divided into several dissimilar segments during the first half of the twentieth century. The first segment consisted of so-called "mainstream" denominations: the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. These churches were clearly of Anglo-Saxon origin and had strong ties to the nation's colonial history. Altogether, these denominations only comprised about five percent of the population, but socially they had above-average sway and commanded a great deal of respect. It was mainly their representatives who made public comments on the burning questions of the day. In the first half of the twentieth century, most of the leading personalities of the American secular, as well as religious, life came from their ranks.<sup>12</sup>

The second group was made up of the populous and well-respected, though less prestigious, Protestant denominations from the southern states.

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<sup>11</sup> Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 3–13.

<sup>12</sup> Ellwood, *1950 Crossroads of American Religious Life*, 30.

These denominations owed their large collective membership mostly to the Second Great Awakening that had moved in synch with the western border of the United States. The Protestants comprised the Methodists (who formed the United Methodist Church in 1939 and thus put an end to the disagreement caused by the Civil War that divided the Methodists into northern and southern factions), the Baptists, the Disciples, and a number of others. In the 1930s, these denominations were integrated into the general Protestant mainstream of spirituality, which became a kind of norm and constant of American spiritual and moral life. This was also reflected in the incorporation of these churches into the Federal Council of Churches, the predecessor of the post-war National Council of Churches.

In 1939, the Federal Council of Churches included the North Baptist Church, the North Presbyterian Church, the Congregationalist Church, the Episcopal Church, the United Lutheran Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Reformed and Brethren Church, the Afro-American Baptist Church, and the Methodist Church. In total, the Council churches represented twenty-one million Americans.<sup>13</sup> The Evangelical, Fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches remained isolated from this group. They were considered nothing more than distant relatives of the Council churches. They gained notoriety for the disenchantment they provoked during the so called “Monkey Trial” of 1925, when they aligned themselves with citizens who wanted to punish all those involved in making references to the theory of evolution at schools. Despite their formal representation in the Council, Afro-American churches also stood outside the circle of respected denominations. It could not have been otherwise in America’s predominantly racist and segregated society of the 1930s.

Together with Judaism, the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches did not form part of the Federal Council of Churches. These three groups of believers were concentrated primarily in towns along the East Coast and they formed their own spiritual subcultures. In the 1930s, most of the members of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches and Judaism were new arrivals and outsiders.<sup>14</sup> Their life centered within their respective ethnic enclave, church or synagogue. The members of all three groups only left their subcultures when they went to work. The first generational shift and

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<sup>13</sup> Ellwood, *1950 Crossroads of American Religious Life*, 31–32; Erwin S. Gaustad, ed., *A Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1865* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 190.

<sup>14</sup> Gaustad, *A Documentary History*, 39, 45, 163, 192–193.



the education of their offspring enabled these groups to leave their ethnic ghettos and integrate themselves into the mainstream. The Second World War then accelerated this emancipation process considerably. However, in the 1930s, the Catholics, members of the Orthodox Church and the Jews did not engage in religious discourse with the representatives of the mainstream Protestantism that dominated American society. Emancipation of Catholics and Jews as well as their growing acceptance by the society represents one of the largest changes in American society after the Second World War.

## **The Crucial Decade of 1950s**

In the 1950s, churches and religion in the United States primarily represented a solid barrier that would prevent communist penetration into the society. All religious denominations experienced a substantial rise in the number of their adherents. This period of post-war optimism and prosperity, together with the soldiers' return home to their families, brought many children into the world (the so-called "baby boom").

The baby boom, together with extraordinary economic prosperity, was caused by the fact that over the preceding years, many young people had postponed starting families and purchasing commodities such as cars and houses. In 1945–1960, America's population rose by almost forty million. That represents a 30 percent rise (which culminated in 1957).<sup>15</sup> This dramatic population increase had important repercussions. Since the 1950s, the history of the United States has basically become the history of an unusually immense young generation. Therefore, the course of the baby boom generation's life cycle has made a considerable impact on all of history's sociological parameters.

In the 1950s, the number of believers in all American denominations was rising at an even more rapid rate than the number of the nation's inhabitants. This is evident according to the documentation that certain churches kept, and most historians agree on it. The increase in the number of religious adherents is also observed in the work of Andrew M. Greeley, who gathered data from sociological studies carried out by the AIPO, the SRC and the NORC. Greeley is, however, more prudent in his evaluation of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 437.

the 1950s as a turning point leading towards Americans' heightened religious activity. He also questions the representative quality and objectivity of the data that was provided by the studies and by churches themselves. If we were to count all the people who were baptized by Catholics, we would end up with some very misleading information.<sup>16</sup>

The 1950s are characterized by the recognition of growing religiosity in the United States. Facing a communist threat, J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, stated: "If communists are atheists, make sure your child is a believer." President Eisenhower also repeatedly declared that belief in the Almighty was a basic manifestation of Americanism, and Congress, not wanting to be left behind, added the words "One Nation under God" to the American "Loyalty Oath" in 1954. During the following year, it decreed that the phrase "In God We Trust" was to be printed on all US dollar banknotes.<sup>17</sup>

In its history, the United States has never had an official state religion that would function as one of its unifying features. Nevertheless, it can be said that the Christian faith shapes one of the keystones of the American identity. During the Cold War, religious faith of any kind clearly became a strong factor unifying Americans to resist the Soviets, a country where proclaimed official faith was atheism.

The Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States began to intensify as their ideologies clashed, resulting in the brutal Korean War in 1950–1953. The cold and hot war of ideologies enabled religion to mythologize the conflict and interpret it as a crusade (or a holy war) against the forces of evil. In the confrontation between the American way of life and another, strange one, Americans necessarily considered the latter to be "evil". This tendency had manifested itself among Americans as early as during the Spanish-American war in 1898. In all likelihood, it can be said that the perception of the enemy itself, whom Americans associate with the religious symbolism of evil, stems from strong religious belief.

Billy Graham represents traditional Protestant concept of religion which underlines man's sinfulness and imperfection. In 1950, Graham, an overnight evangelical star whose Protestant faith was bound to pessimism, declared that the people of the United States had only a few years to commit themselves to spiritual conversion, through which they would

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<sup>16</sup> Greeley, *Religious Change in America*, 42–45.

<sup>17</sup> Gaustad, *A Documentary History*, 488.

find safety and salvation. He personified a peculiar brand of patriotism that was reflected in the following mottos: “If you want to be a patriot, become a Christian. If you want to be a loyal American, then become a loyal Christian.” According to Graham, the world was divided into two warring camps. Communism, which was declaring war on God, Christ, the Bible and all religion, was America’s enemy.<sup>18</sup> Billy James Hargis, an anti-communist and the founder of the Christian Crusade movement, said the following sentences, which characterize the atmosphere in the United States in the 1950s perfectly: “People want to be a part of something bigger. They want to belong to a unified group. They love Jesus and at the same time they are very scared. When I told them that the menace was communism, they saw it as a revelation [...]. They knew I was right without having known before what that fear was.”<sup>19</sup>

## **American Catholicism Boosts its Immutable Tradition**

American Catholicism of the 1950s, spearheaded by Pius XII, a strongly anticommunist Pope, shared the same dualistic concept of the world. This view was also supported by Francis Cardinal Spellman, the archbishop of New York and American Catholicism’s chief spokesperson, and Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen, who was one of Catholicism’s most popular clergymen. Many American Catholics had ethnic roots in East European countries; therefore, they could not forget about their co-religionists, who numbered in the tens of millions and who ended up in the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence after the Second World War. It was a hellish empire that was trying to abolish religion completely and replace it with communist ideology.

The world was almost perfectly divided dualistically into a camp of the fair-minded and a camp of darkness. This corresponded with theological concepts of the world as a battlefield between good and evil principles. From the Catholic faith’s perspective, it is worth mentioning that the Pope declared 1950 a holy year.<sup>20</sup> This was a time when everyone was supposed to re-establish their loyalty to the church and undergo a special pilgrimage to Rome to receive plenary indulgences. From the Catholics’ point of view, this year then culminated in the declaration of a new dogma regarding the physical

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<sup>18</sup> Ellwood, *1950 Crossroads of American Religious Life*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Sherwin, *The Extremists* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1963), 110.

<sup>20</sup> Ellwood, *1950 Crossroads of American Religious Life*, 131.

assumption of the Virgin Mary.<sup>21</sup> This new dogma was widely discussed among Catholic intellectuals. During the period of the spiritual battle with communism, this dogma was deeply symbolic and was to confirm the power, immutability and conviction of the Catholic faith. For Catholics, the year 1950 marked officially a return to the faith of their fathers, a return to tradition. The Catholic Church wanted to be a solid rock of certainty in a world that indulged in materialism, despite the fact that its self-confidence had been shaken by the horrors of the war, concentration camps, gulags and nuclear explosions.

With admiration, the Catholic Church looked to the Thomism-imbued Middle Ages, and to the period of certainty generated by the Counter-Reformation movement. The works of writers such as Thomas Merton (*The Seven-Storey Mountain*) then contributed to the temporary restoration of the monastic movement of American Catholics.<sup>22</sup> In the post-war history of the twentieth century, the greatest academic interest in Catholic seminaries was shown in 1950. It seems that in the 1950s, all Americans longed for something stable in their lives.

## Years of Change

The National Council of Churches, which united 29 denominations, most of them Protestant, and consisted of 31 million people altogether, was founded in Cleveland in late November 1950. It can be said that these were beginnings of an ecumenical effort being made by Protestant Americans. The founding of the Council, however, divided American Protestants into denominations that cooperated with the Council and other denominations, mostly Unitarians and Universalists, who were too liberal for the Council. 30 million Roman Catholics also understandably remained detached from the Council.<sup>23</sup>

However, under the influence of the perceived communist threat, strong antipathies between American Catholics and Protestants were overcome in the 1950s. The Catholic Church was no longer seen as a foreign element in American society. The irony of this is that some historians, such as Robert S. Ellwood or Warren L. Vinz, ascribed this on the fact that Joseph McCarthy, a popular senator of the 1950s who sparked hysteria over a communist

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<sup>21</sup> This move damaged ecumenical relations of Catholics with Protestant denominations, because Protestants do not acknowledge the special position of saints and the Virgin Mary. They disapprove any Marian worship. l.c.

<sup>22</sup> Chester Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 75.

<sup>23</sup> Gaustad, *A Documentary History*, 456.

conspiracy in the United States, was a Catholic.<sup>24</sup> The Catholic Church's strong anti-communist sentiments, however, certainly helped persuade many Americans that their Catholic compatriots were as patriotic and as willing to confront the communist menace as they were.

In addition to transforming Catholics' social status, which culminated in the 1960s when John F. Kennedy became the President of the United States, the 1950s also brought about a change in the status of inhabitants of Jewish origin. After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, predominantly evangelical Protestants, emphasizing the literary interpretation of the biblical prophecy of Armageddon, the valley where according to biblical prophecy, the final battle between the forces of good and evil would be waged, began to feel an obligation to support the Jewish State and the Jewish nation in its struggle for survival.<sup>25</sup> Thanks to evangelical Christians, Judaism then officially moved out of society's margins to become the third-most influential religion in the USA. The changes in the social status of Catholics and Jews were the most distinct religious transformations to take place in the 1950s.

The sad reality was that most of the nation's churches were strictly racially segregated. Many churches had signs telling black or "colored" believers to visit the neighborhood church that was intended for them.<sup>26</sup> However, a change was developing quietly and unnoticed in this matter as well. In 1950, Martin Luther King Jr., a student of Crozer Seminary in Pennsylvania, was introduced to Mahatma Gandhi's teachings about passive resistance and non-violence. That same year, a man named Malcolm Little was imprisoned. He subsequently adopted Islam and became a black activist known as Malcolm X. The path towards the dramatic changes that American society experienced in the 1960s thus became open not only in terms of the soul but also in terms of civil and human rights.

## What Data Can Reveal

According to the opinions of historians and eyewitnesses, the 1950s saw the signs of a return to traditional tried-and-true values. Names like Auschwitz, Treblinka, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki presented a clear message that progress, science, and faith in humanity had failed. The

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<sup>24</sup> Warren L. Vinz, *Pulpit Politics* (New York: SUNY Press, Albany, 1997), 116.

<sup>25</sup> Gaustad, *A Documentary History*, 442–448.

<sup>26</sup> Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America*, 81.

above-mentioned sites of tragic events were perceived as a consequence of too much modern faith. Consequently, it was easy for educated believers to see the dangers of the fruits of enlightenment that the Church had always fought against. Therefore, it was necessary that the 1950s bore traces of “counter-reformation and contra revolution.”

The era’s literature has preserved the reactions of prominent theologians and philosophers to the pressing issues of the time. However, the question is to be posed here: “To what extent was the thinking of neo-Thomists Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gibson reflected in the lives of common Catholic believers?” and “To what extent did the reflections of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr influence Americans of the Protestant faith?” The matter can be sketched by sociological studies that have been carried out systematically in the USA since 1947. One of the flaws of these studies is that they do not allow for comparison between the 1950s and previous eras. Most of these studies are able to relate, in quantitative terms, the upswing in American religious life in the 1950s only through comparison between the indicators of the 1950s and the years that followed, which have been considered a period of religion’s decline. In spite of these deficits, the aforementioned studies can provide a new perspective on the assessment of American religiosity in general. It is enough to be aware of the fact that people have a general tendency to regard the present as an era suffering from the degeneration of traditional values while they idealize preceding eras.

Most social phenomena connected with religious belief indicate a high degree of stability and invariability over the course of time. Whenever there are changes in the religious faith of the American people, social studies show that these changes do not apply to fundamental religious doctrines. They have not changed in any way over the last forty years, during which time the studies have been carried out. AIPO data shows that in every survey that has been conducted since the 1944 nine out of ten Americans have said they believe in God. For the sake of comparison, the actual percentage was 97 percent in 1944 and 95 percent in 1981. In 1952, 77 percent of respondents affirmed that they believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ, while in 1983 this figure was 76 percent. AIPO data reflects the fact that God plays a very important role in the lives of the American people. In 1985, respondents from the countries listed below stated how important God was in their lives on a scale of one to ten points. Americans gave God’s importance a score of 8.2, the Irish 8.0, Italians 6.9, Spanish 6.4, British 5.7,

and Swedes 3.9. It follows that American religiosity is much stronger than that of other nations in the modern, technology-bloated West.<sup>27</sup> The studies of 1944–1985 did not reflect any evident changes in the American people’s belief in the afterlife. Three quarters of the respondents said they believed in the afterlife, 6–7 percent were not sure, and one fifth did not believe in it. The study also revealed that most respondents who believed in the afterlife also believed in the existence of Heaven. In 1952, this figure stood at 71 percent and in 1980 it was 70 percent. However, belief in the existence of Hell dropped from 58 percent in 1952 to 53 percent in 1980. According to the studies, belief in the afterlife not only remained the same; it was not even dependent on the age and education of the respondents.

It was possible to prove the decline in the literal perception of the Bible as an absolute and word-for-word description of the truth. Literal interpretation of the Bible decreased from 65 percent to 38 percent in 1963–1968. Similarly, faith in the infallibility of the Bible also experienced a decline. The highest drop in terms of the literal interpretation of the Bible occurred among Catholics, who were not bound as tightly to its dogma as evangelical Protestants.<sup>28</sup>

Thus it seems that there were only minor changes in American religiosity for which developments in the Catholic Church can be blamed. With the exception of certain external signs that directed society’s attention towards religion, American religiosity itself did not change significantly; it neither grew nor waned. There were changes connected with believers leaving the main Protestant denominations to join smaller ones. That was the only major change registered among American Protestants.

According to AIPO data from 1937, 73 percent of population were members of one church or another. This figure actually rose to 76 percent in 1947, and dropped to 67 percent in 1982. However, Andrew Greeley interprets this fall as a consequence of the high proportion of young people in the population.<sup>29</sup> Greeley identifies with the description of American religiosity’s development on the basis of stability model. In theory, this model fully describes religiosity’s development among American Protestants, Catholics and Jews. It seems thus more than sufficient for describing major behavioral traits of the American population.

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<sup>27</sup> Greeley, *Religious Change in America*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

## Conclusion

From the point of view based on the analysis of literature dedicated to American religiosity's development in the second half of the twentieth century, it is evident that religious life in the United States has gone through at least two eras during which it captured society's attention and dominated communication media. These two peaks were the 1950s and the 1980s. At first glance, the decades between, before and after them must seem like periods of a decline in the intensity of religious life and its social significance. However, the truth of the matter is more complicated. The results of sociological studies in this field disprove any dramatic shifts in the meaning that religion has had for the American as an individual.

Thorough analysis of the 1950s (alleged) increase in spirituality revealed a clear association with the distinct visualization of religious themes in public. American society, which has traditionally been deeply rooted in religion, probably needed to cope with the modern horrors it had just witnessed. Therefore, in the 1950s Americans felt a strong need to reinforce each other's belief.

In 1950s, religion could still explain the meaning of a person's life and his position in the world better than science with its merciless natural laws. In all likelihood, this was the main reason that society gave religion so much publicity. The fact that the phrase "In God We Trust" appeared on all new banknotes in 1955 does not necessarily signify that Americans believed less in God in previous years. However, the 1950s saw the revival of the traditional religiosity that was highly suspicious of modern changes because it was pining for the return to *ad fontes* – return to the world from which it had emerged, the traditional world that most religious fundamentalists were longing for.

When evaluating historians' contributions based primarily on period literature, which, according to society's demands, favors religious themes in one decade somewhat more than in another, regardless of the intensity of the population's actual religious life, it is necessary to proceed as carefully as when assessing the value of sociological studies. An illustration of this point can be found in an odd sociological discovery that 95 percent of Americans believe in God and 2 percent of Americans never pray. What logically follows out of this is the fact that a total of three percent of Americans pray but do not believe in God. If we theologically interpret a prayer as a dialogue



with God and not as, say, a Zen meditation, this means that 3 percent of Americans pray to a God they do not believe in.<sup>30</sup>

The historical and sociological perspectives on the development of American religiosity reveal some interesting information. However, it is necessary to realize that this information is a part of a much larger mosaic that, in all probability, we will never be able to monitor fully. American religiosity has definitely gone through some changes but these changes pertain more to the manifestations of this religiosity in later decades, particularly among American Catholics. In all likelihood, the key change in the religiosity of the 1950s was the amount of publicity that religion was being given throughout the decade.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 66.