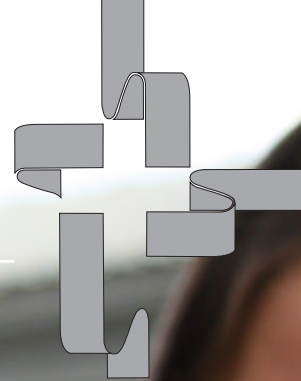


faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Summer 2015



State Department Says 'No' to Iraqi Christians

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See page 8 for a peek behind the curtain of some "progressive" or "hip" evangelical churches. Above: Congregants gather inside Hillsong Church of Sydney, Australia in 2007. (Photo Credit: Matt Malone/Wikipedia)

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COVER

The U.S. government has made it clear that Christians will not be supported because of their religious affiliation, even though it is their religious affiliation that makes them eligible for asylum based on a credible fear of persecution from ISIS.
 (Photo Credit: Philos Project)

Pew Survey and Lament for Nominal Christianity

A new Pew survey shows the number of Americans identifying as Christians declining from 78% to 70% since 2007. The religiously unaffiliated have increased from 15 to almost 23%. Non-Christian religionists have increased from about 5 to 6%.

Secularists and their fellow travelers are ecstatic. The secular utopia about which John Lennon crooned in “Imagine” is impending. Christianity is finally dying! Some Christians who relish doom are bracing for collapse and the End Times. Other Christians more thoughtfully point out the survey reflects self-identification, not practice.

Some surveys show church attendance steady across decades, as are rates of core Christian beliefs. Evangelicals are the one Christian group to have grown numerically and almost retained their population percentage, now at 25%. A growing majority of Protestants are now evangelical, and half of all Christians now identify as evangelical or born-again. Liberal Mainline Protestantism unsurprisingly continues its fast decline, dropping from 18 to under 15%. Catholics dropped from about 24% to 21%.

The ongoing trend seems to be that nominal, mostly non-practicing Mainline Protestants and Catholics increasingly identify as unaffiliated. Most of this group still professes belief in God, many pray, and some attend church. But they no longer claim ties to a specific tradition. Less than a third, about 7%, are atheist or agnostic.

Some evangelicals have celebrated this trend as the implosion of nominal Christianity that is creating bracingly clearer boundaries between authentic faith and secular culture, enhancing opportunities for witness and evangelism. This attitude is upbeat and rightly embraces our current times as providentially challenging. But it may yield too much to the survey, which is probably overhyped.

Overreaction should be avoided. Active Christianity remains robust in America. Orthodox Christian expressions are displacing declining liberal forms. But there is cause for concern and sadness, as Mainline Protestantism, once central to American life, and a unifying spiritual and civil force, recedes ever more dramatically. An America more and more torn between secularists and the spiritually ambiguous on one side, against evangelicals and believing Catholics on the other, will be even more polarized, missing the common language that Mainline Protestants offered so effectively for centuries.

There should also be some lament for the fading nominal Christians. These persons frustrated traditional Christian expectations of robust spiritual commitment and church involvement. But at least they recognized partly, if only in theory, the church’s moral and spiritual merits. They retained a frame of reference that tied them at least tangentially to the church and a specific tradition.

Their newfound unaffiliated stance likely still involves for many occasional and peripheral church connections. But in their new self-identity they are also more atomized and distant

from Christian tradition and community. Non-affiliation may more truthfully reflect their reality, but it also creates one more layer of separation from the Body of Christ or any organized faith group. Nominal Christians may also be more susceptible to the appeals of rabid secularists, who remain numerically few but culturally privileged and disproportionately influential.

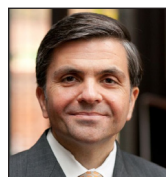
As to the non-Christian religions, their numbers remain much smaller than outspoken pluralists typically assume or claim. Muslims stand, although growing, at less than one percent, despite longstanding claims by some Muslim groups to number two or three times this size. Hindus also are under one percent. Jews increased slightly to almost 2 percent, seemingly reversing previous declines.

The Pew survey is certainly notable but it does not conclusive-

ly prove a seismic shift in America’s national character nor can its trends be mechanistically projected onto the future. That future and its religious trends remain contingent upon yet-to-be-made choices and actions by over 315 million Americans, who remain overwhelmingly religious, and whose destiny is fully known only to Providence, not surveyors and commentators. ✚

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Mark Tooley



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

Presbyterians Collapsing or 'Settling into the New Thing God Is Creating'?

A slimmed-down Presbyterian Church (USA) is apparently getting ready for beach season after shedding unwanted excess members, according to a cheery report by the denomination's top official.

"The PC(USA) is a church made up of vibrant congregations doing their best to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in their communities and in the world," an unfazed Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk

of the General Assembly of the PCUSA, reported. "Membership declines continue, but on a whole the denomination is settling into the new thing God is creating."

The PCUSA's Office of the General Assembly revealed a loss of 92,433 members (down 5.54 percent) to a total membership of 1,667,767 in 2014. The 2014 numbers reveal the church's largest statistical decline to date.

The PCUSA has lost 645,895 members since 2005, 28 percent of the denomination's members having vanished. The PCUSA and its two predecessor bodies have been in decline since 1965.

The PCUSA's rate of decline is now exceeding all of its Oldline Protestant peers. ✚

The Rev. Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) speaks at the denomination's 220th General Assembly in Pittsburgh on July 1, 2012. (Photo Credit: Presbyterian Church U.S.A.)



Memories Pizza and Real Social Justice

The dust is finally settling after harassment and death threats besieged the Christian owners of a small pizza restaurant in Walkerton, Indiana. National media attention catapulted the father and daughter owners of Memories Pizza to the center of a national firefight over religious freedom. Forced to close their doors and go into hiding, Kevin O'Conner contemplated closing up shop permanently due to violent threats.

Their circumstances changed when *The Blaze* launched an online fundraiser

raising \$842,387 from nearly 30,000 donors across the country. The O'Conner family expressed their wish to share the \$842,387 funds with disabled children, abused women, public safety officer foundations, local churches, and a battered grandmother struggling to operate a floral shop and live by her faith. As the *Daily Mail* reported:

"They revealed they are set to share their new fortune with disabled children, a women's help group, fire fighters, police trusts, Christian churches and Washington florist Barronelle Stutzman, 70, who was fined after declaring she would not serve a gay wedding."

Comments made by Crystal O'Conner during a spontaneous interview with a local reporter sparked nationwide attention to the pizzeria. She answered a hypothetical question about catering a gay wedding ceremony.

After attacks smearing her character and compassion, Crystal expressed, "People were looking at me and all that brought my spirits down. But the support we got also lifted me and made me stronger and humbled." ✚



(Photo Credit: Yelp/Memories Pizza)

Bishop Heather Cook Deposed from Episcopal Ministry

Embattled Bishop Heather Cook has resigned as Bishop Suffragan in the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland and has separately been deposed by Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori as part of a church disciplinary action. Both announcements came in late April, with the Presiding Bishop's office issuing a media release stating that Cook "will no longer function as an ordained person in The Episcopal Church."

Cook was indicted on multiple charges in February following a December 27 crash that killed a cyclist, 41-year-old Thomas Palermo.

According to Cook's Sentence of Deposition, the former second-ranking official in the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland shall be "deprived of the right to exercise the gifts and spiritual authority of God's word and sacraments conferred at ordination."

The release concludes by stating that the accord reached between Cook and the Presiding Bishop's office is separate from any resolution of employment matters involving Cook and the Diocese of Maryland as well as from criminal matters pending in the secular courts.

The bishop is charged with driving under the influence resulting in a homicide, vehicular manslaughter, criminal negligent manslaughter, texting while driving, and fleeing the scene of an accident. A Breathalyzer test showed Cook's blood alcohol level was .22 following the accident. If found guilty, Cook could face a maximum sentence of 10 years imprisonment for each charge of manslaughter and driving away from the accident.

A trial date originally set for June 4 before the Baltimore City Circuit Court has been postponed until September. ✚



Heather Cook arrest photo, provided after she was charged with DUI, manslaughter, and leaving the scene of an accident. (Photo Credit: Baltimore Police Department)

South Africa Fails to Arrest Indicted Sudanese President

A Sudanese official indicted for war crimes has been allowed to return home after attending a conference of African government leaders in Johannesburg in June.

The South African government disregarded a court order by the South African Litigation Centre to hold Sudan President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir while the Pretoria High Court decided whether or not to arrest him on charges issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Pretoria High Court issued orders for al-Bashir's arrest hours after he departed the country.



Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir, president of Sudan, sits in the Plenary Hall of the United Nations Conference Centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, during the 12th African Union Summit Feb. 2, 2009. (Photo Credit: Jesse B. Awalt/Defenselibrary.org)

Before the African Union Summit, the ICC urged the South African government "to spare no effort in ensuring the execution of the arrest warrant." South Africa is party to the Rome Statute of the ICC.

The Sudanese leader is implicated in wars that have cost the lives of some 5 million people and displaced another 8 million. It has been five years since the ICC brought charges against al-Bashir and two other Sudanese officials for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in Darfur. ✚

RCRC Campaigns to Use Taxpayer Money for Abortions for Boko Haram Victims

A group of U.S. Religious Left officials is calling for the Obama Administration to end a ban on taxpayer-funded abortions in order to terminate the pregnancies of women abducted by Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram.

Last year's abduction of hundreds of Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram ignited outrage on social media. Kidnapped schoolgirls from the town of Chibok remain captive, but other victims are emerging from the forests of north-eastern Nigeria, in some cases, impregnated by their former captors.

"Now as women in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria and many other un-named places have been subjected to systematic sexual abuse, rape and forced marriages, religious leaders in the United States are responding to the moral imperative of our faith traditions by calling for action on behalf of women and girls raped in war," declared the Rev. Harry Knox, President of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a group that advocates for unrestricted abortion.

The group counts denominations like the Episcopal Church, agencies like United Methodist Women, and unofficial church caucus groups like Catholics for Choice among its affiliates.

Knox spoke at the gathering in June of a handful of religious officials held at

St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. The coalition of liberal Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Unitarian figures was convened by RCRC and a group called the Center for Health and Gender Equality. They called for the Obama Administration to reinterpret the 1973 Helms Amendment that prohibits the use of federal funds for abortion overseas.

"Anti-life forces have been pushing for a couple of years to undermine the Helms amendment," notes William

L. Saunders, Senior Vice President and Senior Counsel at Americans United for Life. "Pro-lifers will have to stay vigilant."

The disagreement hinges on whether the Helms amendment prohibits funding for abortions in general, or just for "family planning" purposes. In asking the Administration to change its interpretation to allow funding for some abortions, RCRC aims to bypass legislative repeal of the Amendment.

Most Americans have never favored using public funds for abortions. According to a 2014 CNN survey, 56 percent are opposed, with only 39 percent favoring public funding for abortions. ✚



Captured schoolgirls from the town of Chibok, Nigeria are seen following their capture by Islamist militants (Photo Credit: Persecution Blog)

State Department Says ‘No’ to Iraqi Christians

by Faith McDonnell

Writing in April in *USA Today* about the murder of 12 Christian migrants thrown into the sea by Muslims for praying to Jesus, columnist Kirsten Powers stated that President Barack Obama “can’t seem to find any passion for the mass persecution of Middle Eastern Christians or the eradication of Christianity from its birthplace.”

This seems to be standard policy. There is no passion for persecuted Christians under genocidal threat from the Islamic State, and there is no room for them, either. Despite ISIS’ targeting Iraqi Christians who stand in the way of a pure Islamic Caliphate, the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) told Anglican Bishop Julian Dobbs that “there is no way that Christians will be supported because of their religious affiliation.” The words of Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, Northern Iraq, show understandable desperation:

Throughout all these long centuries, we have experienced many hardships and persecutions, offering caravans of martyrs. Yet 2014 brought the worst acts of genocide against us in our history. We now face the extinction of Christianity as a religion and as a culture from Mesopotamia [ancient Iraq].

In June 2014, assisted by local Sunni Muslims, ISIS captured Mosul, home to many Christians and other religious minorities. Christians, Yazidis, Mandaeans, etc., were targeted for destruction. Within the first week of ISIS’ occupation, more than 500,000 people fled the city.

Christians’ homes were marked with the Arabic letter *nun*, for “Nazarene.” Christians were threatened with death if they did not convert to Islam, pay *jizya* and live as a subjected people — *dhimmi* — or flee immediately.

Two months later, ISIS seized control of Qaraqosh, “the Christian Capital

Scripture commands us to “do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). But in reality . . . , Christians are given the exact opposite of preferential treatment.

of Iraq.” According to a March 26, 2015, *Newsweek* article, as many as 1.4 million Christians lived in their ancestral home of Iraq prior to 2003. Now the number of Christians is estimated to be between 260,000 to 350,000, with many displaced within the country. *Newsweek* said Iraq’s remaining Christians have mostly fled north to safer areas under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government. “But now ISIS is threatening them there, too,” the article warns.

Christians are sheltering in unfinished concrete buildings — such as shopping malls — in the Christian enclave Ankawa rather than in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camp because they are even threatened by some of the Muslim refugees. Dobbs informed the State Department that an international Christian aid agency had purchased used but high-quality military tents from British troops in Afghanistan to set up for the Christians on land provided by the local authorities.

However, neither the British nor American government would transport the tents from Afghanistan to Iraq. The State Department told Dobbs that emergency housing just for Christians in the region was “totally inappropriate.” So the group must raise some \$778,000 to transport the tents to Iraq.

Also inappropriate, it seems, is resettling vulnerable Assyrian Christians in the United States. Private sector donors have offered complete funding for airfare and resettlement of these Iraqi Christians who sleep in public buildings, on school floors, or worse.

But the State Department — while admitting 4,425 Somalis to the United States in just the first six months of FY2015, and possibly accepting members of al Nusra and ISIS through the tax payer-paid Syrian and Iraqi refugee program — told Dobbs that they “would not support a special category to bring Assyrian Christians into the United States.”

The United States government has made it clear that Christians will not be supported because of their religious affiliation, even though it is their religious



An Iraqi Christian woman wipes her face (Photo Credit: Philos Project)

affiliation that makes them eligible for asylum based on a credible fear of persecution from ISIS. But like much of the media and other liberal elites the Administration insists that Christians cannot be given preferential treatment. Even within the churches, some Christians are so afraid of *appearing* to give preferential treatment to their fellow believers that they won't plead the case of their Iraqi and Syrian brothers and sisters.

Scripture commands us to “do good to all people, *especially to those who belong to the family of believers*” (Galatians 6:10). But in reality the narrative is false. For the most part, Christians are given the exact opposite of preferential treatment. It is “detrimental,” “prejudicial,” and “unfavorable.” To deem it “preferential” is laughable. Western Christians should work to change this narrative.

On April 30, The Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom director, Nina Shea, wrote about the State Department's refusing a non-immigrant visa to an Iraqi Catholic nun. Sister Diana Momeka was to come to Washington to testify about how ISIS treats Christians

and other minorities. All the non-Christian members of her delegation were approved. She received a refusal letter saying she didn't demonstrate that her “intended activities in the United States would be consistent with the classification of the visa.” And she was told at the U.S. consulate in Erbil that she was denied “because she was an IDP [Internally Displaced Person].” In other words, Sister Diana could use her non-immigrant visa to remain illegally in the United States. You know you can't trust those Brides of Christ to keep their word!

Following up on May 3, Shea revealed that the State Department had asked her to revise her article. Shea refused, and wrote that those who blocked Sister Diana's entrance:

...[A]cted in a manner consistent with the administration's pattern of silence when it comes to the Christian profile of so many of the jihadists' “convert-or-die” victims in Syria, Libya, Nigeria, Kenya and Iraq. In typical U.S. condolence statements, targeted Christians have been identified simply as “lives lost,” “Egyptian citizens,”

“Kenyan people,” “innocent victims,” or “innocent Iraqis.”

Other human rights and religious freedom advocates also pressured the Administration. Amazingly, on May 9, the State Department reversed its decision and approved Sister Diana's visa. On May 13 she testified in a full committee hearing before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

We do not know if the State Department will also be persuaded to change its mind on supporting persecuted Iraqi and Syrian Christians who are asking for U.S. asylum. But at the very least, we should do all we can to change the false narrative about the “preferential” treatment of Christians in the Middle East.

A longer version of this article was originally published by Philos Project and is reprinted with permission. ✚



Faith J. H. McDonnell is the Director of Religious Liberty Programs at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Here's How the New Christian Left Is Twisting the Gospel

by Chelsen Vicari



Peek behind the curtain of some “progressive” or “hip” evangelical churches, past the savvy technology and secular music, and you will find more than just a contemporary worship service. You’ll find faith leaders encouraging young evangelicals to trade in their Christian convictions for a gospel filled with compromise. They’re slowly attempting to give evangelicalism an “update”—and the change is not for the good.

It is no secret that there is an expanding gulf between traditional Christian teachings and contemporary moral values. But the sad truth is that the ideological gulf between America’s evangelical grown-ups and their kids, aka the “millennials,” seems to be widening, too.

Somehow the blame for this chasm is being heaped on traditional churches. They are accused of having too many rules

as well as being homophobic and bigoted. Yes, we’ve heard those false claims from popular culture in its desperate attempt to keep Christianity imprisoned within the

The seasoned Christian soldiers are noticing these distortions of the gospel. But for young evangelicals, the spiritual sludge is harder to wade through.

sanctuary walls. But now popular culture is being aided by Christ-professing sympathizers whose message to “coexist,” “tolerate,” and “keep out of it” is more marketable to the rising generation of evangelicals.

Congregants gather inside Hillsong Church of Sydney, Australia in 2007. (Photo Credit: Matt Malone/Wikipedia)

The seasoned Christian soldiers are noticing these distortions of the gospel. But for young evangelicals, the spiritual sludge is harder to wade through. Desperate for acceptance in a fallen world, many young evangelicals (and some older ones) choose to park Christ inside the chapel, thus unwittingly killing the church’s public witness. In this uphill cultural battle, mired by scare tactics and fear, three types of evangelical Christians are emerging:

• **Couch-potato Christians:**

These Christians adapt to the culture by staying silent on the tough culture-and-faith discussions. Typically this group will downplay God’s absolute truths by promoting the illusion that

neutrality was Jesus' preferred method of evangelism.

- **Cafeteria-style Christians:** This group picks and chooses which Scripture passages to live by, opting for the ones that seem to jive best with secular culture. Typically they focus solely on the “nice” parts of the gospel while intentionally minimizing the concepts of sin, hell, repentance, and transformation.
- **Convictional Christians:** Despite the larger culture's harsh admonitions, these evangelicals refuse to be silent. Mimicking Jesus, they compassionately talk about love and grace while also sharing with their neighbors the need to recognize and turn from sin.

The Collision of Faith and Culture

Faith and culture will continue to collide in America. The outcome of the culture wars, the flourishing of families, the success of missions, the prosperity of our great nation—the future rests on millennial evangelicals' worldview. And that is cause for concern, because something has gone wrong with young evangelicals' theology.

The millennial generation's penchant for “feel-good” doctrine is playing a big part in America's moral decline. Millennials' religious practices depend largely on how the actions make us and others *feel*, whether the activities are biblical or not.

Popular liberal evangelical writers and preachers tell young evangelicals that if they accept abortion and same-sex marriage, then the media, academia, and Hollywood will finally accept Christians. Out of fear of being falsely dubbed “intolerant” or “uncompassionate,” many young Christians are buying into theological falsehoods. Instead of standing up as a voice for the innocent unborn or marriage as God intended, millennials are forgoing the authority of Scripture and embracing a couch potato, cafeteria-style Christianity all in the name of tolerance.

Christian Doctrine Hijacked

Millennial evangelicals were taken to church by their parents, but their training has been hijacked by ineffective and sometimes intentionally distorted doctrine.

As constant and pervasive as the attacks on Christianity are at public universities, remember that millennials' worldviews begin emerging long before they move out of their parents' houses.

Yes, these young evangelicals had been listening to their Sunday school teachers and their parents, but they had also been listening to their public school teachers, TV celebrities, and rock stars.

Their understanding of Jesus' teachings and cultural convictions begin to form while they are still at home and under the influence of their local churches.

Early in my Sunday school teaching days, my co-teacher and I followed the curriculum pretty narrowly, the exception being that my co-teacher had an outstanding knowledge of biblical history that he imparted to the children.

We taught them about Jesus' birth, resurrection, and saving grace. Thinking the fluffy kids' ministry curriculum covered all of the necessary bases, I felt confident these kids had a firm grasp on their Christian worldview. Boy, was I wrong!

One day my co-teacher and I decided to play “True or False.” We casually went down a list of worldview questions with our class, sure that our little evangelicals would nail every question correctly.

No. 1: Jesus is God. “True.” Great job.

No. 2: Jesus sinned. “False.” Bingo!

No. 3: Jesus is one of many ways to heaven. “True.” What?!

Shocked is the only way to describe how I felt. Hadn't they been listening to us? When I asked who taught them that, one girl said, “Coexist.” Yes, these young

evangelicals had been listening to their Sunday school teachers and their parents, but they had also been listening to their public school teachers, TV celebrities, and rock stars.

Youth ministers, volunteer leaders, and pastors also have to start preparing these kids to deal with the very real hostility that faces young evangelicals.

If we never talk about abortion in church, how can we expect the rising evangelical girl to calmly explain the option of adoption to her frightened best friend who just admitted she is pregnant?

If America's evangelicals disengage from the public square and fail to engage the rising generation of Christian leaders, we risk losing our public voice, and then our religious liberty, and then liberty altogether.

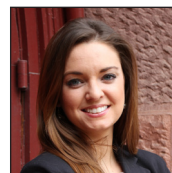
Heed the Warning Signs

All that evangelicals and culture warriors in the U.S. have to do to discover what happens when Christian denominations give up their traditional convictions and teachings is to look at the dwindling memberships of mainline Protestant denominations.

In order to safeguard the future of young evangelicals, we must uphold the authoritative Word of God. It is imperative that those in a position to influence millennials have transparent and honest discussions about the culture wars that are already ravaging evangelical youth. Otherwise, millennials will be silent and passive in the face of persecution and false doctrine.

The importance of arming the next generation of evangelicals with biblical truth cannot be overstated. If we continue to follow the example of mainline Protestants, evangelicalism will have a gloomy future. We must offer sorely needed leadership, but before we can do that, we need to know exactly what we are up against.

The original version of this article was published by Charisma Magazine. ✨



Chelsen Vicari directs the Evangelical Action program at the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

United Methodist Seminary Tackles Spiritual Warfare

by John Lomperis

Even many conservative evangelicals seem embarrassed by the more supernatural aspects of Christian faith. But within the United Methodist Church, United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, is now taking the supernatural seriously.

United now offers multiple conferences on the theme of divine healing. Last December, they devoted an entire conference to “Spiritual Warfare and Deliverance.”

This third annual Holy Spirit Seminar was co-sponsored by United and Aldersgate Renewal Ministries.

Conference speakers observed that our denominational culture has forgotten how to talk about the Devil.

William J. Abraham, Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at Perkins School of Theology, noted that the world needs “a clear diagnosis of evil.”

Many churches now “borrow from secular notions to understand what’s gone wrong” while ignoring crucial resources within Christianity itself, according to Abraham, a former atheist. In another address, Peter Bellini, a missiology professor at United, noted that our United Methodist Church “has bet the farm on the idea that we can just change social systems to bring the Kingdom of God.”

But none of this will “turn the world around,” Abraham insisted. The heart of the problem of our fallen world is explained in Genesis 1-11: “We’ve been put in a good creation; we found ourselves mistrusting because we believed half-truths about God; so then we rebelled.”

When we try to explain away the numerous biblical accounts of demons and exorcisms, we end up falling into the same theological liberalism, with its foundation of anti-supernaturalism, that has plagued our denomination for more than a century.

As Bellini pointed out, thinking that “Jesus was just using the language of his day” in talking about demons and did not literally mean what he said lays the foundation for denying the resurrection and other biblical miracles.

Spiritual Warfare in Practice

Speakers noted that Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have well-developed exorcism rites, with every diocese of the former having its own exorcist.

Abraham explained that there are “invisible, spiritual, and incorporeal” agents who “are not detectable by any scientific instruments” but “are made manifest by certain unusual phenomenon” and are seeking “to destroy the created order.” He observed that the subject of demonic activity is one of “hard facts and phenomena that are extremely well attested across cultures and across time.”

Esther Acolatse, a native of Ghana and Assistant Professor of the Practice of Pastoral Theology and World Christianity at Duke Divinity School, warned that we have a real enemy who seeks “to attack the faith of the believer” and “to turn people into sinners.”

Bellini framed deliverance as a subset of healing. He described it as unpleasant, “dirty work,” likening it to being “exterminators for the church.” Satan is “not our own worst enemy – we are,” since “[t]he Devil can only work off of what we feed him.” Among the things Bellini listed “that invite in the demonic” were occultic practices (“you’d be surprised how many people in your church are into it!”), trauma, abuse, sexual sin, “or any sin practiced enough.”

Both Abraham and Bellini cited examples of missionaries with Enlightenment, anti-supernaturalistic worldviews who traveled far to spread the Gospel, only to be woefully inadequately equipped to

reach and minister to the people in their mission fields who were oppressed by supernatural phenomena.

Several speakers offered summaries of key characteristics of demonic activity, practical how-to principles for exorcisms, and accounts of their own experiences. I don’t know of any other official United Methodist seminary offering such training!

One of the most memorable stories was how Bellini, soon after his conversion from atheism, joined a friend in bold street evangelism. This led them to encounter some individuals who were deeply involved in the occult, and who told Bellini and his friend that they were praying and performing rituals to curse them. One night, his friend woke up with an apparition of two of these occultist young women at the foot of his bed. Five minutes later, he received a phone call from one of them, who laughingly asked “Do you see us?” They would regularly come to pray against the church of Bellini and his friend. Until one day, a lady in the congregation reported that she had received “a word of knowledge” and told these young women that they were practicing witchcraft. This prompted one of them to fall down screaming, until they both walked out.

Safeguards and Perspective

This conference very intentionally included a healthy amount of cautions and safeguards against some of the excesses that taint the entire charismatic movement in the minds of many.

Abraham, echoed by other speakers, was clear that “methodological naturalism needs to be our default,” meaning that “we need to first eliminate naturalistic causes” before rushing to blame demons.

The consistent theme of the speakers was that we should seek a balance



The Rev. Dr. Peter Bellini addresses the United Seminary "Spiritual Warfare and Deliverance" conference. (Photo credit: John Lomperis / IRD)

between as Acolatse put it, either "demythologizing scripture" and "psychologizing every problem," or "thinking every problem needs a prayer for deliverance." Acolatse further cautioned attendees to learn from the biblical report of Sceva's would-be exorcist sons that "exorcism is not for everyone" and it is "not to be done apart from the Christian community."

Bellini, a self-described "Metho-costal," admitted that there was "a lot of kooky stuff" within the Pentecostal/charismatic movement. He explained that he very intentionally grounds his own Metho-costalism in a Wesleyan/holiness theological framework and *not* in a "health and wealth" gospel. He stressed that "not everything is a demon," psychiatric medicine is okay, and exorcism is "only for last-resort, extreme cases." Our primary solution to evil, Bellini said, is the cross of Christ and our dying to ourselves.

In talking about the importance of a spiritual foundation of sanctification, the

Presbyterian Acolatse sounded almost Wesleyan at times. She explained that we need "a life so turned to God that we become so allergic to sin that we can't bear to have it around us." The Duke Divinity professor also highlighted the indispensable importance of compassion for those for whom we are called to provide pastoral care, rather than judgment.

Neil Anderson, the former chair of Talbot School of Theology's Practical Theology department, highlighted the centrality of forgiveness in Christian ministry, and the primary importance of focusing on genuine repentance and faith rather than on demons. He warned against talking about spiritual warfare in ways that get "church people to fear the Devil more than they fear God," who is so much more powerful. Anderson is convinced that "unforgiveness is the biggest

way Satan gets a toehold in the church." He quipped, "Bitterness is like swallowing poison hoping the other will die."

At the conclusion of this remarkable conference, David Watson reported that "a number of healings and divine deliverances" had taken place during its course. This included two women being dramatically healed of chronic back and neck pain.

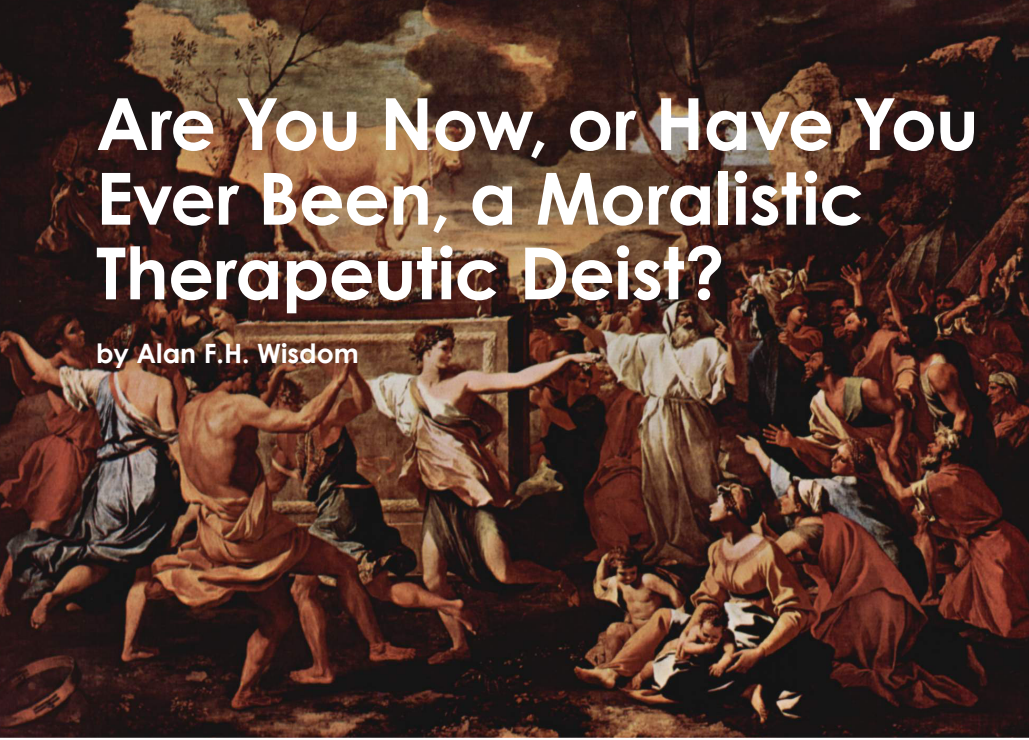
The Holy Spirit can still work miracles today, even among mainline Methodists. ✝



John Lomperis directs the UMAction program at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Are You Now, or Have You Ever Been, a Moralistic Therapeutic Deist?

by Alan F.H. Wisdom



*The Adoration of the Golden Calf by
Nicolas Poussin (1634)*

few complaints about the experience. It's just that they didn't emerge with a distinct Christian faith that they could articulate and practice.

Is This What We Teach Our Children?

Dean suggests a disturbing explanation: Perhaps these teenagers and young adults adopted MTD because that's what they were taught. That's basically the philosophy of life they have received from and observed in their parents. It's what they learned in Sunday school and youth group: Be nice to other people and you'll have a happy life, and God will be there when you need him. All that stuff about Jesus dying for our sins never really made an impression.

Dean's presentation provoked some self-examination at my church: Is MTD what we are teaching our kids? When my wife and I lead Children's Church, is the message the children are hearing the Gospel of God's great mercy in Jesus Christ? Or is it something less? Are we preparing them to be nice people or disciples of Jesus?

I must admit that some of the Sunday school curriculum we have used has been very moralistic and therapeutic. We read Bible stories, but the takeaway at the end of the lesson often seems to be that everyone is special to God and kids should be kind to their classmates. There isn't much said about our being sinners to whom God sent a Savior.

How would your congregation fare under this kind of self-examination? Maybe you intend to communicate the Gospel, but are you sure that's what the children are hearing? It's a question worth asking.

This article originally appeared on the website of Theology Matters. ✝

There is talk in some church circles about "moralistic therapeutic deism" (MTD). Some contend that this belief system, rather than classic Christianity, is the predominant religion among today's teenagers and young adults. Worse still: We, the parents and adults around them, are the ones who taught them MTD.

An Inarticulate Faith

The ungainly phrase "moralistic therapeutic deism" was coined, not surprisingly, by an academic: Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith. It has been disseminated by Smith's associates, including Princeton Seminary professor Kenda Creasy Dean. Based on her research with Smith, Dean published a book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. She speaks frequently at local churches, including my own a few months ago.

Smith, Dean, and their colleagues conducted surveys and interviews in which they queried young people about their religious beliefs and practices. Very few, they found, were atheists or hostile toward religion. On the other hand, relatively few could articulate a faith that resembled classic Christianity. The vast majority found it difficult to articulate any kind of belief system. To them, God is a vague and distant being. They didn't have much to say about Jesus.

What the respondents did seem to believe was that God functions as an authority who gives us rules to guide our

behavior (this is the "moralistic" part). The main point of these rules is to be a nice person who gets along with other people. If we obey the rules, God makes us feel good about ourselves (this is the "therapeutic" part). But God isn't involved in a personal or direct way in our daily lives (this is the "deism" part). Thinking about God may reassure us in a crisis.

Almost Christian

This set of assumptions is what Smith, Dean, and associates call "moralistic therapeutic deism." It's not necessarily false. We should seek good relations with the people around us. If we obey God's commands, we will usually end up happier. God is a refuge in times of trouble.

Yet the Good News of Jesus Christ is so much greater than this. Dean, in her talk, showed a side-by-side comparison of MTD and the Apostles' Creed. The differences were stark. MTD is all about me and my happiness. The Apostles' Creed is about the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and God's amazing works from the Creation to the Incarnation to the hope of life eternal.

So how did these teenagers and young adults come to settle for so much less than the Gospel? It wasn't by rebelling against their parents' religion. On the contrary, survey respondents by and large felt positively toward their parents and shared common values. Many reported that their parents had taken them to church and youth group, and they had



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Want to Attract Millennials? Assemblies of God Leader Offers What Not to Do

by Chelsen Vicari

George O. Wood, the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God (USA), does not believe the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Episcopal Church are dying congregations because their worship sets clash with Millennial preferences. Instead, he maintains young Christians are departing church groups that have “abandoned belief in the authority of Scripture.”

The Assemblies of God leader offered his comments during a press conference at the Empowered21 Global Congress, a spirit-filled gathering of nearly 4,000 Pentecostals from more than 70 nations, as *Christian Post* reports.

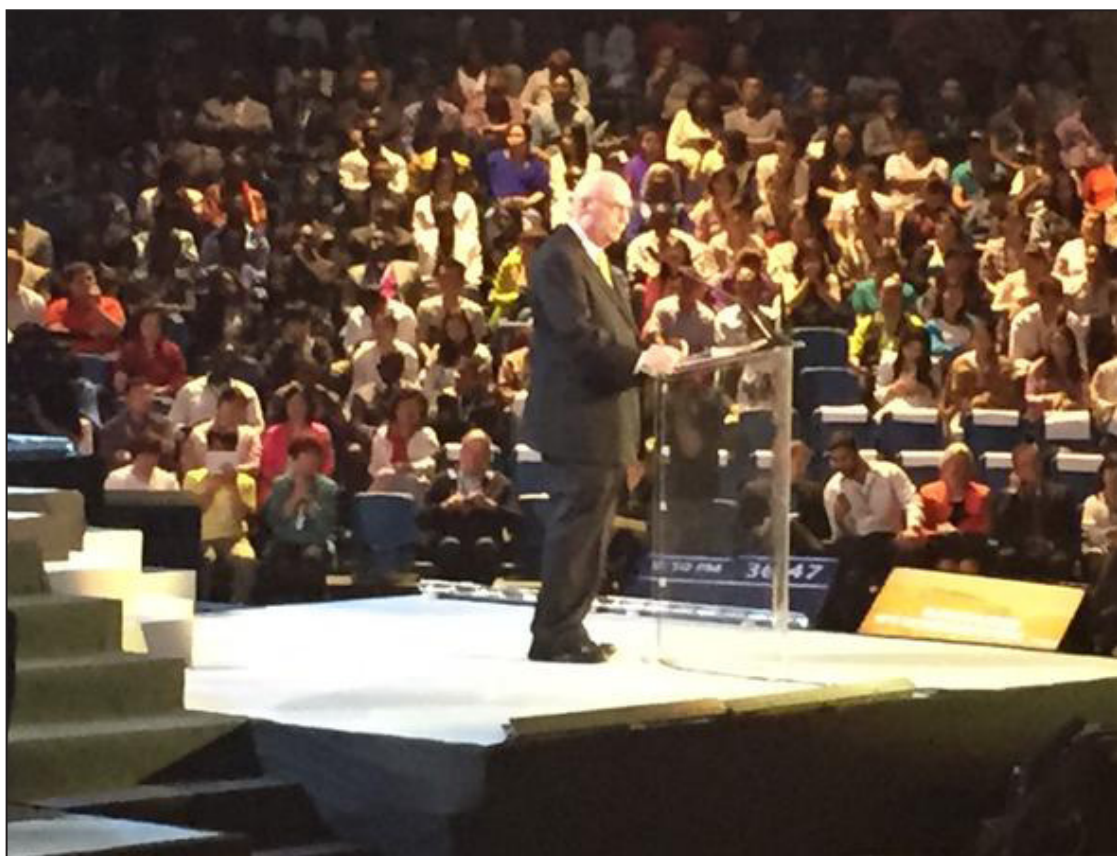
“The young people that are moving away from traditional religious structures in the U.S. typically belong to churches which have abandoned a belief in the authority of Scripture and the uniqueness and centrality, and exclusiveness of Jesus Christ,” says Wood. “They have no belief to hang on to since that has all been gutted by those who have chosen, under the guise of religion, to reject the very claims of the founder of the religion.”

Wood’s remarks nod towards the latest Pew survey showing U.S. Christian groups in steady decline, with the only exception being evangelicals. In addition, news confirming the ongoing decline among liberal mainline denominations comes from the PCUSA’s Office of the General Assembly. The PCUSA’s recent membership report reveals a loss of 92,433 members. The Institute on Religion and Democracy’s Jeffrey Walton notes this is a significant 5.54 percent loss in membership since 2014.

In contrast, several denominations maintaining traditional Christian teaching continue to grow. The Assemblies of God is one such example. “All I can do is tell you our statistics in the USA,” says Wood.

“We [AG USA] have 3.1 million young people in the USA and 34 percent of [adherents] are under the age of

the age of 35. We have also grown in diversity—now, just over 40% of our adherents are ethnic minority.



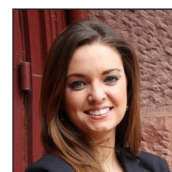
25.” Last year, Assemblies of God USA reported a growth of 1,428 congregations over four years. Globally, the Assemblies of God has actually grown by 15,176 total churches. Among the new members are millennials and minorities.

A representative from the U.S. General Council of the Assemblies of God offered the IRD specific data:

- Since 2007, the Assemblies of God in the U.S. has grown by 264,592 adherents (8.4% growth), 487 churches (3.8% growth), and 3,013 ministers (8.2% growth). Since 2001, 21% of our growth has been in the 18-34 year-old demographic. Now, 54% of our adherents are under

George O. Wood, the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God (USA) speaks at the Empowered 21 Conference (Photo Credit: Twitter)

- The Pew study focuses solely on the U.S., but we have also seen steady growth on a global level. Since 2007, we have grown by 7,464,882 adherents (11% growth) throughout the world, adding 54,057 churches (14.8% growth). ✝



Chelsen Vicari directs the Evangelical Action program at the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

Same-Sex Marriage and Missing Churches

by Jeff Walton

Lauren Markoe of the Religion News Service (RNS) recently wrote about the decision by the Presbyterian Church (USA) to permit same-sex marriages and how, according to a poll from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), a majority of Mainline Protestants now support the practice.

At the same time, the article notes that the majority of church-affiliated Americans belong to denominations that

Alongside Mainline Protestant and some Jewish groups, the chart reports support from the Alliance of Baptists for same-sex marriage. The liberal group of 130 congregations split off from the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and reports 65,000 members.

The RNS chart cites the LGBT advocacy organization Human Rights Campaign as the source of their data, which is problematic. HRC is motivated to show

momentum among religious groups for an embrace of same-sex marriage. By elevating tiny groups like the Alliance of Baptists that favor same-sex marriage while excluding significantly larger churches that oppose it, RNS spins the HRC data in such a way that it appears 40 percent of these religious groups affirm the practice, when in reality a tiny minority do.

In the same chart, the large Assemblies of God

goes unmentioned (apparently lumped into the more generic “Pentecostal” category). All but one historically African American denomination is omitted. What about the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod? The Evangelical Presbyterian Church? The Anglican Church in North America? All are significantly larger than the Alliance of Baptists yet go unmentioned, as do evangelical churches such as the Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army, and Wesleyan Church.

Perhaps the most puzzling part of the chart is Orthodox Christianity, correctly listed as opposed to same-sex marriage, but with the word “most” in parentheses next to it. Are we aware of *any* Orthodox Christian denomination that is on record

supporting redefinition of marriage? No doubt there are some Christians worshipping in Orthodox churches who support same-sex marriage, but this chart is ostensibly about denominational policy, so why the “most” qualification for that tradition and not for others?

Below is a list of several churches missing from the RNS charts, all of which are larger than the Alliance of Baptists, that oppose the redefinition of marriage:

Church of God in Christ	8,000,000
African Methodist Episcopal Church	2,510,000
Church of the Nazarene	2,295,106
Assemblies of God	1,755,872
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	1,400,000
Salvation Army	1,150,666
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church	850,000
Christian and Missionary Alliance	417,000
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	380,728
Foursquare Church	353,995
Evangelical Free Church	371,191
Wesleyan Church	194,000
Association of Vineyard Churches	189,000
Baptist General Conference	147,500
Evangelical Presbyterian Church	145,000
North American Lutheran Church	140,000
Anglican Church in North America	112,504
Free Methodist Church	75,586

Alliance of Baptists	✓	
American Baptist Churches USA		✗
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints		✗
Conservative Judaism	✓	
Episcopal Church	✓	
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*	✓	
Islam		✗
Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod		✗
National Baptist Convention, USA		✗
Orthodox Christians (most)		✗
Orthodox Judaism		✗
Pentecostals		✗
Presbyterian Church (USA)	✓	
Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)		✗
Reform Judaism	✓	
Roman Catholic Church		✗
Southern Baptist Convention		✗

The RNS chart indicates denominations that support same-sex marriage with green check marks while those that oppose it receive a red “X.” The chart has some startling omissions and inclusions.

forbid gay marriage, including Roman Catholics, most Baptists, Pentecostals, evangelicals, and Mormons. Markoe also reports that Mainline Protestants have lost ground in recent decades to other denominations and to independent churches.

Accompanying the article is a denominational chart of same-sex marriage support, with some interesting inclusions—and omissions. Taken together, the missing churches constitute tens of millions of members—a significant slice of the U.S. religious pie—all on record opposing redefinition of marriage. Meanwhile, *all* denominations nationally and globally that support same-sex marriage are in a state of decline.



Jeffrey H. Walton is the Communications Manager and Anglican Program Director at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

David Platt's Call to Counter Culture

by Chelsen Vicari

The last few weeks have seen a lot of commentary on pastors leading the same-sex “affirmation movement.” Church leaders like the infamous unorthodox author and speaker Rob Bell, evangelicals Stan Mitchell of Gracepointe Church in Franklin, Tennessee, and Danny Cortez of New Heart Community Church of La Mirada, California, are just a few of the movement’s leading affirmation pastors.

So when a pastor takes a public stand to say, “I have a deep pastoral concern that Christians and churches are flinching all across our culture” it makes us “ooh and aah” a bit in wonder and admiration. This was the reaction to Dr. David Platt’s keynote address at the annual National Religious Broadcaster’s Convention held in Nashville, Tennessee, last week. What should be the norm for Christian leadership is increasingly becoming the exception.

Platt, the new president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board and author of the books *Radical* and *A Compassionate Call to Counter Culture*, began his address by pointing out the hypocrisy of Christians who advocate for less controversial social issues while avoiding others like life, morality, and marriage altogether. “We are passionate against poverty and slavery, injustice that we should stand against, but issues that don’t bring us into conflict with culture around us. Yet on issues like abortion or so-called same-sex marriage, issues that are much more contentious in the culture around us, instead of being passionate, we are strangely passive.

“Ladies and gentlemen the gospel does not give us that option. We cannot choose to pick and choose which social issues to apply biblical truth to,” Platt said. “The same gospel that compels us to war against sex-trafficking compels us to address sexual immorality in all of its forms.”

Christ followers cannot hide from the truth that abortion is morally wrong

because of the gospel. Platt asserted, “People say abortion is such a complex issue... but if that which is in the womb is a person formed by God, this issue is not complex at all. You cannot believe God’s word and sit back passively on this issue.” If we ignore the genocide of unborn babies murderously dismembered, Platt firmly explained, then we deny with our actions the very biblical truths we claim to embrace.

The second biblical implication is that God creates man and woman for the display of his gospel, “so culturally we flee sexual immorality in our lives and we defend sexual complementarity in marriage for the sake of the gospel in our world.” Platt continued, “The gospel is most clear...so if we want the gospel to be clear in our culture then we must flee sexual immorality in all of our lives. We must do 1 Corinthians 6:18, run from sexual immorality. Not reason with it, not rationalize it, but run from it.”

Platt’s fiercest statement came during his second point, noting that “Homosexual activity is a pervasive topic today. But we must be careful not to be careful of selective moral outrage in our culture.” He continued, “If we roll our eyes and shake our heads at court decisions in our country, yet we turn the channel to stare uncritically at adultery in a drama, watch the trivialization of sex in movies, look at seductive images on reality TV shows and the Internet or virtual prostitution and advertisements that sell by provoking



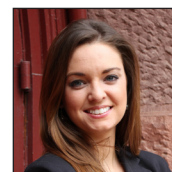
Pastor David Platt is president of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board and author of *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Photo Credit: Videos for Student Ministry)

sexual interests in us, then we’ve missed the whole point.”

Platt’s most emotional, convicting moment came during his last points as he described the reality of death for sinners and the horrific reality of hell. Undeniably, the urgency to share the good news with unbelievers is yet another issue where Christians have become passive. “What is it going to take for the concept of unreached people to become totally intolerable to us in the Church?”

The battle is raging over the very souls of our neighbors. “Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved,” said Platt. “In our leadership let’s be clear. The gospel of Christ compels contrite, compassionate, courageous action on a multiplicity of culture issues. So let’s apply it consistently across our culture while spreading this gospel intentionally across all cultures.”

Amen. ✝



Chelsen Vicari directs the Evangelical Action program at the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

Rick Warren: 'Thank Baptists for Religious Liberty'

by Mark Tooley

Baptists have long been champions of religious freedom, recounted megachurch pastor Rick Warren and Southern Baptist spokesman Russell Moore, in a panel moderated by Judge Ken Starr, president of Baptist-affiliated Baylor University.

The March symposium on "Proselytism and Development" was hosted by Georgetown University's Berkley Center, whose Religious Freedom Project is directed by IRD board member Thomas Farr.

Early champions of religious liberty included Rhode Island colony founder Roger Williams and Baptist clergy like John Leland who influenced Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Religious liberty scholar Paul Marshall, an IRD board member, once noted that ironically the most ardent advocates of religious liberty have been strict theological exclusivists, like Roger Williams, who barely thought anyone but him was saved.

Russell Moore, in his panel with Warren and Starr, made a similar point. "We have a history of being irritants," he said. "Baptists weren't interested in being a mascot. Thomas Jefferson was not qualified to teach in any Baptist Sunday school." Yet Baptists encouraged and supported Jefferson's exertions for religious liberty.

If Caesar has the power to regulate religion, then Caesar has power over the soul, Moore said of the Baptist perspective. Moore's Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission has been prominent in defending domestic and international religious liberty.

Echoing similar sentiments, Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church, a Southern Baptist congregation in California that is one of America's largest churches, observed that countries with the greatest religious freedom have a Christian background.

"Thank the Baptists for religious liberty," urged Warren. "What Jefferson meant by separation of church and state is the exact opposite of what is thought today," recalling Jefferson's famous letter to Danbury, Connecticut, Baptists extolling a "wall of separation" between church and state, which Jefferson meant

but full freedom of religion in every sphere.

Warren warned against double standards. "Proselytizing has become a negative word only used against Christians. But everybody does it. Everybody does it but it's bad only for [Christian] believers." He lamented the pervasive



Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church (Photo credit: Rick Warren / Facebook)

as protection for, not limits on, the church and faith.

Warren sardonically noted that the number of atheists and agnostics is quite small outside Europe and Manhattan. "The future of the world is not secularism but pluralism," he surmised, saying he has no objection to countries recognizing their respective religion's culture-shaping role, whether with Buddha statues or Islamic iconography, so long as they affirm religious liberty in the present.

"Coercion is not conversion," Warren said. "God gave me the right to accept or reject him so I must give others the same right. But I do believe in sharing in what I deeply hold." He noted religious freedom is America's first freedom, and the Constitution doesn't just guarantee freedom of worship as a private exercise

social attitude that, "If you don't agree with me you hate me or you're phobic. It's not hate speech to disagree with somebody."

Agreeing with Warren that evangelicals seek "commonality" with others for the public good, Moore urged finding "Evangelicals who are the most genuinely Evangelical and not the ones who don't believe anything. Don't assume that because an Evangelical is wary [on some issues] or has strong positions that they won't cooperate" on other issues for the common good. ✚



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy



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