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REFERENCES


1 Marc Chaves, professor of sociology, religion and divinity at Duke University wrote this winsome short text to inform students of American religion the most recent developments. His main sources are the General Social Surveys, held since 1972, and the comprehensive National Congregations Study conducted in 1998.

2 The title of the book does not give a hint what the main trend is. It is not a story of strong decline, but of continuity with a slight drop after the mid 1990s. 35-40 per cent of the American population maintains a high level of religious self-identification, which fits into the centuries-long continuous high level of adherence to organized religion. This development of “less religion” in the past forty years is visible in seven categories, ranging from acceptance of diversity, fading away of strong beliefs, drop in involvement, less vibrant congregational life, disrespect to religious leadership, and the increased tension in the relationship between traditional and liberal wings of Christianity. This list suggests, as the author want to do, that “less religion” is not an autonomous trend, but tied to other social phenomena, such as increased diversity, demographic shifts, and changes in the political landscape. The strength of the book is that it ties religious trends closely to these phenomena. A weakness is that this obscures somewhat the view on the religious core: is religion itself that is fading or is the cultural structures around it?

3 The first category that Chaves examines comes closest to that core, namely beliefs: less Americans feel comfortable with a literal reading of the Bible than a few decades ago and more accept a diffuse spirituality. The chapters stay close to observing trends, but also offer some explanations. Chaves points at the rise in education as a cause for lower rate of
literal reading of the Bible. But this might have been caused by the concentration on the period after 1972, which prevents longer trends to be included. A longer perspective might have likely shown that adherence to a strong literal interpretation of the Bible heated up in the 1970s. So the weakening in the 1990s might mean a return to a more “normal” situation. Actually, this decline need not be a sign of weakening religious beliefs only, but a result of a general decline of certainty, a result of postmodernism.

4 Other indicators of slow weakening of religion are a gradual drop in attendance of religious meetings, less cohesive, less loyal and elderly congregations. Moreover, the position of clergy has weakened as a result of televangelists’ scandals and the abuse cases in the Catholic church. The decline is not evenly distributed, the more liberal congregations suffer more than conservative ones. Chaves notes that lower membership in liberal churches does not necessarily mean the same fate for liberal ideas, which are in fact embraced by more people. The book is too short to explore this trend, that historian David A. Hollinger recently described in the Journal of American History (June 2011), but it would be interesting to find out whether those liberal religious ideas are religious or perhaps more humanistic.

5 Two trends are the most interesting: one is the observation that since the 1970s religiosity and conservatism are lumped together. This association gave many people the impression that the force of religion was growing, while in fact a certain profile had gained visibility. Another phenomenon that contributed to the impression that religion was on the rise is the growth of mega churches, which concentrate crowds and programs. The book rightly corrects these remarkable phenomena with more structural behavior and claims that the resulting polarization has made both conservative and progressive sides more intense, but chopped away chunks from the middling groups. The second one is demographics: the drop in complete families, put a lot of pressure on the transfer of religion to the next generation, which weakened the organizations. This change has touched liberal churches the most: lower birth rates.

6 Chaves is careful in predicting future trends because these data might be used for political purposes in the public debate, but he believes the trend of slow decline will continue. He reveals his own concerns by concluding that this decline might be a good thing because that might mean more tolerance for differences, but he also issues a warning. In the US about half of the social capital needed to let citizens function in society and maintain its cohesion is held by institutional religion. Weakening of that function without any replacement might harm civic society. Of course the book leaves a number of subjects untouched, such as minority religions and theological trends, but that is hardly a problem: the main value of this book is its summary of the main trends, which are presented in a balanced way.
AUTHOR

HANS KRABBENDAM
Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg