


Talking Over the Back Fence: A Conversation between a Sociologist of Religion and a Practical Theologian about the Faith Communities Today Findings

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Mikoski: I’m viewing our conversation today as a kind of talking over the back fence between practical theology and sociology of religion.

Thumma: Sure, just call me Wilson ... You know the majority of information that we get about religious life is from Pew and Gallup, Barna, and other polls. They provide a vast amount of information about individuals’ faith and practices. One of the things that sets studies like Faith Communities Today (FACT) apart is that it looks more closely at the bedrock of American religious life—that is the organizational and institutional reality of it. Robert Bellah’s “Sheila-ism” comes and goes with the birth and death of Sheila; individualist beliefs last as long as the individual. But congregations and denominations and the whole infrastructure of religious life really need to be understood and thought about theologically. What is their health, their vitality, because as congregations go, so goes the faith of individuals oftentimes. I think some of the rise of the “nones” and non-affiliating is as much an indictment of the unwillingness by congregations to change as it is a result of shifting social realities.

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Mikoski: FACT, then, studies American religious life by particularly attending to the institutional and not just the individual actor dimension.

Thumma: Right, and the 2020 data highlight some serious challenges to that dimension. The size issue is one issue that concerns me greatly. I think that the size dynamic plays into the question about the decrease in religious participation no matter if it's a very large or a tiny family church, whether you see the demise of weak churches as "pruning" or "decline."

Mikoski: I've just been reading Roozen's piece [in this issue] and one of the things that stuck out to me was that he saw the work originally giving rise to FACT as "comparative ecclesiologies." It can mean a lot of different things and I think it's a generative term theologically. When you hear the term "comparative ecclesiologies," what does that sound like to you? Would you agree with that characterization of what the FACT project is about?

Thumma: What has always attracted me to FACT is its comparative and dialogical methodology. This is about realizing that congregations are never a static entity and, because I'm a sociologist of religion, context really matters. Therefore, the more diverse contexts you have in the conversation, the richer the picture of what the religious life of a community is really like. You can see this in the Seventh Day Adventist article in this issue. They are somewhat of a sectarian group and yet they're stepping outside of their understanding of who they are and what they're about and asking, "How do we compare to others?" You can even see the importance of context in the Roman Catholic piece: looking at the same faith group but in different regions of the country. That comparative approach allows you to see very different dynamics and realities within the same group. So it seems to me that approaching this question from a practical theological viewpoint of what congregational life is really does need to be comparative. None of us, no group's ecclesiology, has the full picture. We began FACT in earnest not when we started wrestling over what questions to ask, but especially how to ask these questions that get at the deepest and most significant rituals and acts of faith in a community when the communities have different understandings of what that means. Someone writing about ecclesiology writes it from their perspective. We all have our internal biases and perspectives. I grew up Independent Baptist; I can't think completely outside of that frame, even after all the training and later religious experiences that I've had. The more diverse people we have in the conversation about what a vital faith community is the more we expand our understanding of how we connect to God in community. All of that diversity really adds to the richness of my thinking about what makes congregational life so significant and where the challenges to it lie.

Mikoski: That raises two questions for me around the term "ecclesiology." The first has to do with a conversation I had with a former colleague, who was serving as our academic Dean at Princeton Seminary. We were doing curriculum revision and in a document that he drafted he used the term "Church" with a capital "C." I gave him critical feedback and said, "Well, I think it should be little 'c' churches."

The invisible common reality “Church” doesn’t actually exist; it’s more of an imaginative construction. We went back and forth on this for a long time, finally, he grudgingly acceded to my change of language, but I could tell that the Karl Barth part of his brain was not happy. The struggle between using the terms “Church” or “churches” raises a question for me that goes back philosophically to the Middle Ages about universals. Do universals (like “Church”) actually exist or do they exist only as convenient labels for a group of unique particulars? When I read the FACT material and I listen to what you’re saying just now, it pushes my thinking in the direction of nominalism (that what actually exists is particulars, not abstract universals). You could say that there’s not one “Church” in Christianity but only “churches.” After all, when you start breaking “Church” down into the Orthodox, the Oriental Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, and the various Protestants, we have to ask to what extent are they overlapping realities and to what extent are they different particular realities. This is the case even if you take one of these large ecclesial identity markers.

Can we say “All Presbyterians think X” or do we have to really drill down to the complexities of the congregational level? Even in the Roman Catholic Church, there are different regions and those regions vary considerably with regard to how they navigate their Roman Catholic identity and understanding.

So, what are we really talking about? Is there a meaningful sense of a larger “Church,” or do we just have a lot of particular manifestations of Christian communities that we group together and put labels on?

Thumma: I do wholeheartedly agree with you. It is “churches” with a small “c.” That has been my experience over years of researching congregations; but I have come to the realization that there is something captured in the large “C” idea of “Church.” The universal idea can’t be completely lost in the particulars. But I don’t even use the term “Church” anymore, it is large “C” Congregations because the idea is more than Christian community. In a sense, it’s the sacredness of the gathered body of believers, whether they’re doing Friday prayer or holding a Shabbat service, or at church on Saturday or Sunday. There are social and spiritual realities around that gathered group of faithful people that transcend the small “c” congregation. This is the community of meaning and memory, that sense of vision and purpose; meaning, there’s more to us than just coming together as individuals. It’s a more collective reality. I think that the idea of gathering together to serve a greater purpose, such as meeting the needs of the surrounding community or the less fortunate, those functions that are and have to be done collectively in a religious context or spiritual context, can be seen as a universal religious congregational reality, as the Church. This religious reality can’t be parochial or individualistic. It has to be seen as something greater than just our group. When you shift from particular forms of faith communities to the comparative functions of faith communities, that’s sort of what has propelled our FACT research, and by coming together we’ve realized that. We differ in many ways and we have to ask the same questions in different formats; but we’re all struggling over how to reach the next generations, how to pass on faith,

and how to deal with size challenges. We're all struggling with how we meet the needs of our local communities striving to connect to the divine. In the past, when I heard capital "C" "Church" as an Independent Baptist, I thought that we didn't belong because that was the Roman Catholic Church or denominational entities. Now, in such a diverse, pluralistic society and globe, we're starting to realize that it's not just "Church." Nevertheless, as a social scientist, I have always inclined more toward making sense of faith communities by the functions I see them enacting. These important functions play out across different faith traditions, across different denominations, and across different congregations, so that's how I wrestle with the small "c" "churches" versus the large "C" "Church." It is sort of a both/and reality.

Mikoski: What I find so fascinating and what you've just described is, in a sense, coming to a kind of convergence about the interplay between the parochial level and a larger religious reality or institutional connection. Yet, instead of the Protestant reformers looking at Scripture and identifying theological norms and working deductively, you're coming at it more inductively and seeing larger notions of ecclesiology in a functional rather than a theologically normed way. It does seem like you've come to a place where you could understand what Paul was talking about: the church, as the body of Christ in which there is both contextual differentiation and a wider connectedness. Each context has its own issues and its own culture and so on, that's true; but it's also true that they are connected. I find it fascinating that there is some place for a larger notion of collegiality or church. You might want to put some qualifiers around it, but it's not just a mere agglomeration of particulars.

Thumma: That has really come about through more than just the research. It's also because of the interfaith nature of FACT. In grad school at Emory, my best friend was a former monk, who is now a lay Catholic and the Dean of Memphis Theological Seminary. We would have deep conversations and I came to realize that we were talking about the same things but his perspective as a lifelong Catholic and mine as a lifelong Independent Baptist meant we just didn't see those theological terms the same way, or the concept as it related to human nature; but yet we were also describing the same reality from two completely different paths. This was true when FACT folks started wrestling over how to ask survey questions about the liturgical reality of congregations or questions about what constituted vitality. For different religious groups, we all knew that a vital congregation had these effects and these functions, but they are expressed completely differently depending on the group. We couldn't ask a specific question or tap into a specific doctrine that would fit everybody in the room. But, we could find ways to get at a common measurement and outcome once we all knew the components used to define spiritual vitality.

Mikoski: This sounds like a reframing in a sense of what out of the Protestant Reformation has been basically incommensurate ecclesiology and, in some sense, not resolvable because of the terms. Instead of theological norms of ecclesiology, you've shifted the conversation to being very serious about empirical research and to looking

at what's actually taking place. It seems like this approach has created a context where there can be very fruitful, constructive conversation out of difference in particulars and that you're sort of surprised by similarity. It's so fascinating to see that you and others in the FACT project are reframing or shifting the whole approach to understanding church by means of overlapping or resonating functions.

Thumma: You can get hints of that in in the conversation from the article in this issue that discusses FACT as an interfaith entity. The effect our group has had on the Muslim researcher or the effect that it had on the Jewish researcher, or even on the Southern Baptist researcher, is quite profound. They're not the same people, and they don't think about religious life and congregational life in the same way after having been part of this community.

Mikoski: I was struck by Roozen's article in this regard. The sort of coming to terms with the implicit Protestantism in the early FACT effort reminds me of when I went to Emory for my PhD and served for a time as the project manager for an effort to get a \$10 million grant to research religious practices. I went and interviewed a lot of people who were doing practical theology. I remember interviewing some people who were not Christian, one of whom was a professor at Emory and a Zen Buddhist. Every question I asked about religious beliefs in relation to practices, he just looked at me like he was puzzled. He said, "We don't do beliefs, we do practices." For him and his religious community, it was all about meditation practice. That's the only thing that he wanted to talk about and that really brought me up short. I tried several different ways to get him to answer my questions and later I came to realize how Protestant I was in my assumptions about what counts as religion. That came to mind when I read the Roozen article about comparative ecclesiologies. Some of it still seemed implicitly Christian and Protestant. You could say "church" or "comparative ecclesiologies" and that works with Christians, but doesn't necessarily work for Jews or Muslims or some of the other religious groups involved in FACT. So, what is the category? It seems like a social science category like "religious community" would perhaps work best.

Thumma: Yes, that tends to be the term that I like the best. Because obviously "church" has a Christian connotation. "Faith community" is what we opted for our name. But, I try to stay away from even "faith community," preferring "religious community."

Mikoski: Because even that sounds too Pauline?

Thumma: Right. As you pointed out, many religions don't have faith in the same way that Christians do.

Mikoski: Judaism is a case in point, because it is a very complicated, multifaceted phenomenon. If you limit Judaism to religious belief, you just cut off a whole chunk of Jewish reality. It is much more complicated than whether you have faith or not. It also depends on which Jewish community you're talking to. For some, it is an ethnicity;

for others is it a set of beliefs and practices. For still others, it is a special heritage. For many Jews, it is all of that.

Thumma: The new data from Pew that just came out a couple days ago on Jewish life in the USA has had a lot of criticism along the lines of how one defines Judaism because the report split the cultural Jews from the religious Jews. For a lot of Jews you can't make that distinction, or not very easily. Similarly, I lived in Korea for a time and there it seemed as though belief and practices were often a mix: shamanistic and magical practices tied in with Shintoism, tied in with Buddhism, tied in with Confucianism. Almost none of those are clearly differentiated until you get to Christianity—Catholicism and Protestantism—which had real communities because the community was actually the congregation. Religion was so embedded in the life and culture of the society that everybody held Confucian ideas and practiced Buddhism at the same time and was also shamanistic. They just lived out all of those different practices and many of these ideas were just second nature to how they saw the world.

Mikoski: That raises another set of really interesting questions about the extent to which people stay in their lane religiously and the degree to which religion is compartmentalized in our globalized, hyper-connected world. There's a lot of multiple religious belonging. That's a nice way to say it, perhaps. A more toxic way to say it is there's a possibility of being Protestant, White supremacist, and American nationalist simultaneously, which seems to me at least to be three kinds of religious communities; yet they're mashed up together in a kind of toxic stew. To what extent are you able to go through FACT research to get at this phenomenon of multiple layering of religious identities? What is your thought about this multiple identity issue of people belonging to particular religious communities?

Thumma: Well, that reality is incredibly evident, the whole notion of shopping for faith and multiple identities. Some use the term "bricolage," kind of picking and choosing. Globalization and, especially, the Internet have only made it much more possible to dabble in meditation and then call oneself a Buddhist. I can be a "Jew-Boo" (Jewish and Buddhist). There are countless ways that's happening and we just can't get away from that. Catholicism has always been good at melding indigenous beliefs and practices into what Catholicism became so it doesn't look the same in every country. Christianity did that from the very beginning with our celebrations of faith. We've actually adopted celebrations of Judaism or other religious traditions. It's a challenge for sociologists, especially sociologists of religion. You can't easily ask a question and say "Check all that apply" when you're trying to define a faith tradition and, for that matter, it gets challenging when you're asking individuals how they identify religiously or what congregation they belong to. We have found increasingly whenever a survey asks, "Do you also belong to other congregations?" there's somewhere in the neighborhood of 15 percent of people who are dually aligned. Some are "multi"; they attend multiple traditions. I think that's only going to increase post-Pandemic now that we've experienced more congregations by worshipping virtually.

Mikoski: Well, that opens up a whole sea of questions.

Thumma: It really does.

Mikoski: It makes me think of when my wife and I were pastors in the Detroit area of a large, suburban, mainly White, Presbyterian church. I would say about 30 percent of the people had been Catholics in their upbringing and, for a variety of reasons, they had shifted over and were members of our particular congregation. That deep Catholic formation was still there and I wasn't ever sure how deep the Presbyterianism went. I could see their Catholicism come out in crisis moments. I guess, in one sense, this is always the question for formation in a particular religious tradition, "How deep does it go?" This phenomenon of multiple religious belonging raises so many interesting and complicated questions, but it seems like increasingly this is more the norm than the exception.

Thumma: It's clearly there in the data. The greater percentage of attenders who are of the same tradition, the less likely they are to be growing. There's something, I think, inherently vital, and I say this in the summary article, as does Erica Dollhopf in the UCC article, that there's something enriching about having a diversity of backgrounds and traditions that goes back to what we were talking about earlier. This complexity more resembles contemporary reality and the world that we all live in. Therefore, a faith and a faith community like that will have better resonance with society. Such communities may be more appealing when someone comes in and says, "Oh, this isn't a group of, you know, German Lutherans; this is America." I think that's part of the reason why we're seeing a continued rise in multiracial congregations. In the course of the 20 years FACT has been gathering data we've seen the percentage of congregations that have 20 percent or more of racial minority presence go from 12 percent of congregations to now this year 20 percent of religious communities. It's doubled in 20 years. Karl Barth should have had a Bible in one hand and one of our studies in the other (rather than the newspaper). The newspapers don't cover congregational dynamics, but Mark Chaves's National Congregations Study at Duke University and FACT do and that's about it.

Mikoski: The theme of hybridity of religious identity makes me also think about the role of other kinds of hybridity in religious communities post-Pandemic. My working hypothesis for religious communities—and for higher education, including theological education—is that the norm will be various kinds of hybridity. It seems to me what you've just been saying is that increasing hybridity in religion is not going to be a new thing in one sense because we already have hybridities of identity and belonging. What we're really talking about post-Pandemic may be hybridity of delivery systems or communication media; but it's not like we don't know about hybridity or are not already negotiating the complexities of hybridity in congregations.

Thumma: We just haven't really acknowledged it at the intellectual, academic level.

Mikoski: Let me shift a little bit. You were part of a conversation that we hosted here at Princeton Seminary over a year ago on overall decline in religious participation in the USA. There is not necessarily a decline in religious orientation or belief, but participation in structures or in an institution. One of the key things that arose from that conversation in my mind was how we make sense of all the sociological data that point to decline in religious participation over the past decade or more. There's a tendency, at least on the part of mainline Protestants, to see it as decline and "Woe is us." Another possibility arose in that conversation, which is a narrative of pruning—a clarifying of vision, commitment, and values on the part of mainline congregations, which would be a good thing. What is the data telling us and what narrative are we using to interpret the data? Maybe the data can support both narratives. You were part of that conversation and now you've got this more recent FACT data. I'd be interested to hear your reflections on these numbers of declining participation in religious institutions. Is it a death spiral or is it pruning? What is happening in American religious life? What story are you telling about the meaning of the data?

Thumma: My crystal ball is still a little cloudy! It's really a very complex question that I continually have to wrestle over because I have to make an assessment of the 2020 FACT data that's in front of me. In some ways, people like a car crash during the races; but, we want to see that person jump out of the car and be okay in the end.

Mikoski: A very American sentiment.

Thumma: Right, exactly. In some ways the direction is clear from both sides. It's clear from the individual data of Pew, Gallup, and others: a sort of disconnection of individuals from religious institutions. It's also true from the FACT data that congregational life is in a state of erosion, if nothing more; but, in many cases, that erosion is threatening the house to fall off the cliff and into the ocean. I would say, for religious communities generally in the big picture it's not a "half full-half empty" glass anymore; it's less than half full. It's not even a matter of whether you are optimistic or pessimistic; it's a pretty pessimistic picture. With the median size of a congregation at 65 weekly attendees, that doesn't sustain a very vital faith community. When you look at the mainline Protestant data, median size drops down to 50 weekly participants. There is some vitality, even in the smaller congregations; they look vital, they're growing, they have active ministry, and, very likely, they're either new and are beginning to grow or they're in smaller towns where they have been a small but vital spiritual presence for years. However, the trends over time in the FACT study have shown that a third of the congregations are growing and the rest are aging and in decline. Smaller-sized congregations have some vitality, but a larger percentage of them are above 250 attendees. There is a sense in which you can interpret all that's going on institutionally as a pruning. There was over-building in the 1950s and 1960s and even in the 1970s and 1980s. You had to establish a congregational church in every New England town, otherwise it wouldn't legitimately be a town. Then, you had to plant other varieties in every town because it became a religious marketplace. So now within a five-mile radius you have seven or eight churches of the

same denomination or of various denominations. Closing some of those congregations is healthy, even if painful. This brings up questions of innovation like holding multiple religious services in a single building, creating multisite churches sharing resources, and mergers. I think some of that pruning is important but so is creativity. You see this happening in the Catholic Church as well with the closing of countless parishes either because the buildings are no longer viable structurally, or there's not enough priests, or there's not the same density of believers in certain parishes, or folks are no longer coming. With the population able to move to the South and West regions, the Northeast and Central states, and especially rural and small town areas, have diminishing populations. Some analysis of the US Religion Census that happens every decade showed that in counties with population declines, the churches remained. These locations had more churches with fewer people and, conversely, areas of population growth had too few churches, thus they had larger numbers of attendees. I think pruning is absolutely essential, but I worry a lot about those congregations under 50 attendees.

I do think there is value in all different-size congregations. Small congregations can do things that very large congregations can't do. Medium-sized congregations can do things that neither of the other sizes do well. Ideally, you would want a wide range of sizes to service the needs and interests of diverse individuals and communities. What's happening, though, is the medium-sized congregations are getting harder to sustain. They get smaller; a few of them may get larger, but most of them are becoming smaller. The small churches can do serious commitment better, but they might not be that attractive to young people or they're not out in the public arena as much or they don't make a splash in the community the way a larger congregation might and so they don't draw many new people in. Therefore, the congregational member age increases, it becomes more staid in worship practices, and less willing to change. When it gets to the point where it can no longer sustain a clergy person full time or any other staff, then programming begins to go down.

At the same time, this faithful remnant give more and volunteer more and it begins to burn them out, especially as they age. I worry about that for the health of the institution and the loss of a variety of faith communities being present in every community. I also worry about the optics of it to society. If in another 10 to 20 years, we have 100,000 fewer congregations than we do now, how does that reality intensify the perception of a secularizing of American society and add to trends toward non-affiliation and growth of the "nones"? If younger generations look around and see thousands of former churches standing empty will they perceive religion to be a thing of the past, and where will society be in terms of values and morality?

Mikoski: This raises a question for me. I just got a copy of Robert Putnam's *Upswing*, where he says that our country has been at this badly divided place before and we were able to pull it together. A lot of people—religious and otherwise—teamed up together to contribute money and to be involved in cooperative efforts to address pressing social problems. Putnam is hopeful that we can do it again and that simply extrapolating current

trends may not be the best way to look at the problems we face as a society, and, by extension, the churches. I don't want to be magical thinker, but, nevertheless, Putnam has made an interesting argument.

Thumma: Okay, have a third Great Awakening.

Mikoski: Some would argue that we are already having a third Great Awakening, but it is not happening among mainline Protestants.

Thumma: The mainline is in good company. The data show that Evangelical churches are also showing decline. I'm not a historian, so I tend to think in shorter trends of decades rather than centuries. But it's hard to know for sure, and I'm not a fortune-teller either. It doesn't look to me like there's a solid base for significant revitalization; that's part of the reason why I wrote the size piece for this issue. My whole career has focused on size. I've studied megachurches (which I know tends to bias me) but that perspective has always been tempered by the FACT research that includes all sizes of congregations. Some of what Putnam lays out would be more likely if the institutional frameworks and infrastructures were there to allow for that to happen. I don't want to go into a conversation about politics or the economy, but it seems like individualism in society has eroded the stability of institutions. Individualism has rotted the mortar between the bricks; the building is just not as stable as it once was. I tend to follow along with some of the social scientists who have talked about the cult of personality and how destructive that can be to a society, of which the current state of politics is a perfect example.

Mikoski: In my view, this is actually kind of the larger theme that has not been sufficiently reflected upon, at least by theologians: a shift from institutional affiliation to a kind of mystic individualism that's deinstitutionalized. This phenomenon illuminates for me one aspect of the meteoric rise of the religious "nones." People will say, "Well, I personally hold these views, but I don't identify with a religious institution." There's a kind of undertone of "We don't need to affiliate with tired old institutions; we need an organic movement." I view this way of thinking as naive anthropology, like we could sustain our religious life merely as free agents and not institutionally committed. This seems to me to be the bigger question underneath a lot of what we have talked about. Can you be fully human and flourish if you're not institutionally committed and supported?

Thumma: Yes, people like Charles Taylor, Robert Bellah, and others, including Putnam, have been wrestling with this for quite some time. We can even see significant individualization of members and churches inside institutional life and organizations in the growth of nondenominationalism. Christian Smith and others have done helpful work on the "Moral Therapeutic Deism" of younger generations: "I know what's right for me, it might not be right for you."

Mikoski: Like Bellah's "Sheila-ism"?

Thumma: Yes indeed but in an ethical way, rather than a spiritual. That moral orientation puts you over and against any organization or any institution. Considering much of what Bellah et al. wrote in *Habits of the Heart*, Sheila was an exceptional case; well, Sheila is all of us now. It's not just the younger generations; Pew data and other polls show that the forces leading toward nonaffiliation affect us all. The Baby Boomers increased in their percent of "nones" over a short time period. This trend isn't just generational; it's also culturally longitudinal for all of us. It means something is happening in our society. I love the Internet, but I do think the Internet has exacerbated the individualization because it allows me as a free agent to go out and explore based on my own personal interests. I shop, I tinker, I meld identities, and I become the master of my own religious vessel.

Mikoski: I'm thinking about interaction with knowledge and computers. It used to be you would have to go to a computer that would take up a whole room. Then, it shifted to a desktop computer and you could have it in your office or your home. Now, it is the individualized computer that is my phone. I can buy anything I want when I want it. If somebody at a meal says, "I wonder about a quote from Yogi Berra," I can ask "Dr Google" and have an answer in a few seconds. We now have the personalization of knowledge. I am the master of my knowledge and my commitments. Don't get me wrong: there's a lot of good things and I wouldn't want to give up my iPhone. On the other hand, it does seem to signal these pretty deep-level shifts and culture.

One of the things that strikes me about FACT, as you said earlier, is that this ongoing effort studies religious institutions; whereas, Pew and Gallup are focusing on the individual. I think I prefer to have stereo vision with data from both sources.

Thumma: It depends on whether you're thinking about the vitality of the spiritual life of Americans or the health and vitality of the religious enterprise. I don't think you can really get a good sense of religious institutions based on surveys of individuals. The more individually focused research may indicate how significant they say worship is for them, whether they read the Bible last week, and if they pondered their pastor's email meditations, but if they haven't been to that church for months, are they participating? This is part of the reason why FACT exists and why we spend the effort: religious institutions matter even as they are eroding. We have to measure the health and vitality, the challenges and future of the religious enterprise at the level of the institutions. Of course, you need both. We do want to understand the consumer-side of the equation; but, if you don't have vibrant institutions you're not going to have vibrant religious individuals from generation to generation. Research shows that when it really comes down to it, the most robust lived religion is among those individuals in congregations. It's harder to sustain individual religious and spiritual practices without a religious and spiritual community. That's one of those functions that crosses most faith traditions. What about Buddhists and others? In many Buddhist-oriented places, much of the society is the spiritual community. Those beliefs and values are so embedded, for example, in Korean culture that the society helps sustain the individual practices. In Judaism, so

much of the religious community is sustained by the family structure. For Protestantism and Christianity in general, the gathered community sustains religious practices. As Muslims leave Indonesia, Pakistan, or Turkey and come to the United States, the first thing they do—and this replicates a long history of immigration—is form a religious community that acts as a sort of social gathering place but also as spiritual sustenance. There’s a reason why the secular Western cultures are at times perceived as an enemy: individualism begins to break down that connection to the religious institution and religious authority structures. So, you have to look at both sides; you have to look at the “consumer” and you have to look at the “distributor” of religious goods. I think in our society, we get too much reporting of how individuals feel, think, and believe but not enough of how well our institutions are doing or adapting. That is what our FACT research tries to address.


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