

Boundaries of Religious Freedom:
Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies

Mark Silk
Christopher White *Editors*

The Future of Metaphysical Religion in America

 Springer

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Processes of globalization have resulted in increasingly culturally and religiously diverse societies. In addition, religion is occupying a more prominent place in the public sphere at the turn of the 21st Century, despite predictions of religious decline. The rise in religious diversity, and in the salience of religious identity, is posing both challenges and opportunities pertaining to issues of governance. Indeed, a series of tensions have arisen between state and religious actors regarding a variety of matters including burial rites, religious education and gender equality. Many of these debates have focused on the need for, and limits of, religious freedom especially in situations where certain religious practices risk impinging upon the freedom of others. Moreover, different responses to religious pluralism are often informed by the relationship between religion and state in each society. Due to the changing nature of societies, most have needed to define, or redefine, the boundaries of religious freedom reflected in laws, policies and the design and use of public spaces. These boundaries, however, continue to be contested, debated and reviewed, at local, national and global levels of governance. All books published in this Series have been fully peer-reviewed before final acceptance.

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This volume, along with the Jewish volume also being proposed to Springer, was funded by resources of the Greenberg Center at Trinity College. Three volumes funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. (on Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics) were published by Columbia University Press.

ISSN 2214-5281

ISSN 2214-529X (electronic)

Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies

ISBN 978-3-030-79902-1

ISBN 978-3-030-79903-8 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79903-8>

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This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Introduction: The Future of Religion in America

This book, *The Future of Metaphysical Religion in America*, appears in the Springer series *Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies*. It was, however, conceived and planned as a volume in the now-discontinued Columbia University Press series, *The Future of Religion in America*. As a result, it has both a North American focus and a particular intellectual background that readers should know about at the outset.

The volumes in the *Future of Religion in America* series shared a common argument: that the cultural assumptions undergirding religious life in the nation changed dramatically in a brief period in the closing years of the twentieth century. Our North American focus followed from the collection of survey research that served as the foundation of the series. The planners were persuaded that the appropriate place to begin remapping the American religious landscape (our goal) was with demographic data. As a common resource for the series, Lilly Endowment, Inc. funded the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, the third in a series of comparable, very large random surveys of religious identity in the United States. With data points in 1990, 2001, and 2008, the ARIS series provided robust and reliable data on religious change over time down to the state level, data that was capable of capturing reliably the demography of the 20 largest American religious groups. Based on interviews with 54,000 subjects, the 2008 Trinity ARIS equipped our project to assess in detail the dramatic changes that have occurred over the past several decades in American religious life and to suggest major trends that organized religion faces in the coming decades. It has also allowed us to equip specialists in particular traditions to consider the broader connections and national contexts in which their subjects “do religion.”

The ARIS series suggests that a major reconfiguration of American religious life took place over the past several decades. While signs of this reconfiguration were evident as early as the 1960s, not until the 1990s did they consolidate into a new pattern—one characterized by three salient phenomena. First, the large-scale and continuing immigration inaugurated by the 1965 immigration law not only introduced new populations of adherents of world religions hitherto little represented in the United States but also, and more significantly, changed the face of American

Christianity, and especially the Roman Catholic Church. Second was a realignment of non-Catholic Protestants away from “mainline Protestantism” and toward Evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Protestantism.

The third shift may be most consequential: the Rise of the Nones, those who tell survey researchers that they have no religious identity. The prevalence of Nones varies from region to geographic region, with the Pacific Northwest and New England at the high end and the South and Midwest at the low. The Nones’ share of the American population doubled in the 1990s and has only grown since. Americans of Asian, Jewish, and Irish background are particularly likely to identify as Nones. Likewise, Nones are disproportionately male and younger than those who claim a religious identity. Nevertheless, there is no region, no racial or ethnic group, no age or gender cohort that has not experienced a substantial increase in the proportion of those who say they have no religion. It is a truly national phenomenon, and one that is at the same time more significant and less significant than it appears. It is less significant because it implies that religious belief and behavior in America have declined to the same extent as identification with religious institutions, and that is simply not the case. But that very fact makes it more significant, because it indicates that the rise of the Nones has at least as much to do with a change in the way Americans understand religious identity as it does with a disengagement from religion. In a word, there has been a shift from understanding one’s religious identity as inherited or “ascribed” toward seeing it as something that individuals choose for themselves. This shift has huge implications for all religious groups in the country, as well as for American civil society as a whole.

The bottom line for the future of religion in America is that all religious groups are under pressure to adapt to a society where religious identity is increasingly seen as a matter of personal choice. Ascription will not disappear, but there is little doubt that it will play a significantly smaller role in the formation of Americans’ religious identity. This is important information, not least because it affects various religious groups in profoundly different ways. It poses a particular challenge for those groups that have depended upon ascribed identity, challenging them to develop not only new means of keeping and attracting members but also new ways of conceptualizing and communicating who and what they are. Preeminent among such groups are the Jews, whose conception of religious identity has always been linked to parentage; it is only converts who are known as “Jews by choice.” If to a lesser degree, Catholics and Mormons have historically depended on ascriptive identity to keep their flocks in the fold. For other groups, perhaps better adapted to contemporary trends, the rise of personal choice presents less of an existential challenge since they have always placed great emphasis on individual choice. Among them are the traditions addressed in this volume, a cluster of eclectic, shifting, fast-changing and often less institutionally oriented groups that we and many other scholars, especially historians, have begun to call “Metaphysicals.”

These groups usually have been portrayed as marginal actors on the American scene, but recent historical scholarship has demonstrated persuasively that, despite their appearance of “newness,” Metaphysical traditions are deeply rooted in the American past, have been a factor in religious life at every stage in American

history, and are an active, creative presence on the current scene. One of the complexities of writing about these groups is that there has been little agreement about what to call them. Over the last several decades, scholars have used labels including cults, sects, New Religions, the occult, New Age, alternative spiritualities, harmonial religion, New Religious Movements, “spiritual but not religious,” and Metaphysical. In sociology and religious studies, where scholars have striven to avoid pejorative labels, New Religious Movements has enjoyed substantial support. We have made a different choice, one shared by many historians of religion in America. The chief dissent here is an objection to the “New.” Since the 1960s, historians attempting to convey the key manifestations of religion in American have insisted that the alternative religious and spiritual traditions we address share recognizable, significant, deeply rooted characteristics and have played a central role in American religion since the colonial era. The shared contours of this Metaphysical tradition will be described by the volume editor, Christopher White, in his introduction.

The volume aligns itself with a historiographical tradition that dates to the 1960s. Sidney Ahlstrom termed this tradition “harmonial” in his magisterial *Religious History of the American People* (1972), bringing it in from the margins of narratives of American religion. Jon Butler followed up, insisting that “occult” groups played a major role in American religious life during the colonial period and the Early Republic in his 1990 book *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. Catherine Albanese completed the job in her influential 2007 book *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of Metaphysical Religion in America*. She argued, with little dissent, that an eclectic but coherent Metaphysical tradition has served as a “third force” in American religion (alongside mainstream denomination-alism and Evangelical Protestantism) since the European Renaissance, although it has often manifested in less open and less institutional forms than the other “forces.”

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Metaphysicals Introduction

In the 2004 metaphysical film *What the Bleep Do We Know?* the main character, a depressed photographer living in Portland, Oregon, comes to see life from a new perspective. Played by Academy Award winner Marlee Matlin, Amanda begins the story as a victim of circumstances that are beyond her control. She catches her husband in bed with another woman. She experiences a host of other misfortunes. She becomes depressed and dependent on medication. Over time, however, she discovers that reality is not something that simply happens. Even physical realities, including things that seem beyond our control, are not wholly governed by materialistic laws but are spiritual, energetic, and subject to change. They can be shaped by our thoughts and beliefs: Our minds create reality. These ideas are explicitly articulated in cutaway interviews with mystics, neuroscientists, and physicists who discuss the energetic nature of physical reality and how it can be influenced by the mind. Even quantum physicists are brought in to confirm that human consciousness shapes the natural world and that therefore, as the University of Oregon physicist and spiritual teacher Amit Goswami says, “I create my own reality.” By the end of the narrative, Amanda has learned to create a joyful life for herself by engaging in a kind of positive thinking that leads to self-confidence and good fortune.

If there is such a thing as a quintessential metaphysical believer, Amanda just might be it. She believes that reality comprises spiritual energy, and she is certain that she can attract that energy with practices such as repetitive affirmations, guided visualization, or meditation. She insists that the world is filled with this divine energy and that both spiritual salvation and physical healing come from understanding and harmonizing the self with it. Though this way of thinking about God and salvation are different from classical Christianity, they have had a long history in America, going back to nineteenth-century movements that included mesmerism, Mind Cure, New Thought, Christian Science, and what are sometimes called metaphysical healing movements. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, other movements incorporated these metaphysical notions, including divine science and positive thinking groups, the pastoral psychology movement, the New Age, and myriad groups calling themselves “metaphysical.” These ideas also became important for mainline American Protestants, including, for example, the famous

Methodist preacher Norman Vincent Peale, whose bestselling books and popular ministry earned him a Presidential Medal of Freedom under Ronald Reagan in 1984. Today, metaphysically oriented workshops, retreats, books, websites, apps, and movements are experiencing an astonishing efflorescence.

The Rise of Metaphysical Religion

The rise of New Age and metaphysical religion has been accompanied by a number of dramatic demographic changes over the last 30 years. During that time, surveys have examined the astonishing rise of unchurched but “spiritual” Americans turning away from religious institutions. The first survey to document this shift was the ARIS survey at Trinity College. In 1990, the first year of the survey, 86% of Americans identified as Christians. This was a familiar number and one that had held steady for roughly a century. By 2001, however, ARIS uncovered something unusual. In 2001, the percentage of Americans who identified as Christian had dropped to 76.7%. At that time, major news organizations commented on the apparent decline of American Christianity, though some wondered if this new study was merely a statistical anomaly. ARIS data collected in 2008, however, showed that the numbers indicated a real trend, and other surveys, such as those by the Pew Foundation, showed that Christian decline continued in the 2008 to 2012 period. In 2008 and 2009, Pew had the number of self-identified Christians in America at 77%; in 2010, that number went to 76%; in 2011, it was 75%; in 2012, it was 73%; in 2014, it was 70%. According to Pew and ARIS, a key factor behind this decline was a growing distaste among Americans for organized religion in general and a conviction that religious identity ought to be chosen, not inherited or ascribed. These ascendant ideas have been noted for decades by sociologists, including Bellah et al.,¹ so they were not new; but they were gaining in acceptance.

As the numbers of self-identified Christians declined, journalists and scholars searched for new ways of talking about religious America and how it was changing. Commentators have talked about the rise of the “nones,” that is, Americans without a specific denominational affiliation.² Historians and sociologists have pointed to the hidden histories and diverse contemporary manifestations of another

¹Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University Of California Press.

²Michael Hout, and Claude S. Fischer. 2002. Why more Americans have no religious preference: Politics and generations. *American Sociological Review* 67:165–190; Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert Putnam. 2012. Secular and liminal: Discovering heterogeneity among religious nones. *Journal for the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 49:596–618; Baker, Joseph O., and Buster G. Smith. 2009. The Nones: Social Characteristics of the Religiously Unaffiliated. *Social Forces* 87:1251–64.

hard-to-define but pervasive group, America's spiritual seekers.³ Others have attempted to understand recent surveys by Newsweek and other organizations that put the number of Americans who say they are "spiritual but not religious" at an astonishing 25 to 35% of the population.⁴ What does the rapid rise of this category in particular mean? One difficulty is understanding the nature of the "religious" in a country in which institutional affiliation declines while certain elementary religious or spiritual beliefs flourish. So the question becomes how to understand the changing nature of religious belief and commitment when older categories no longer seem to fit.

One category that has become important to both historians and sociologists is metaphysical religion or metaphysical spirituality. The Yale historian Jon Butler was one of the first American historians to point to the ongoing power of the metaphysical tradition. In his 1990 book, he critiqued those who relied on evangelicalism as an organizing device for understanding religion in America and showed that three different impulses in American religious history continued to be important. He identified them as denominational Christianity, evangelicalism, and "occult" or metaphysical spirituality. Many others have noted the power of occult or metaphysical religions in modern Europe, documenting a spiritual revival that began there over one hundred years ago and is still crucial to Europe's "spiritual revolution" today.⁵ In Northern Europe, there has been a dramatic decline in theistic and traditional religion and a corresponding rise in what is sometimes called post-Christian or New Age spirituality.

Another senior scholar of religion in America, Catherine Albanese, has argued more forcefully than Butler that the metaphysical tradition should be central to narratives about American religion, past and present. In a magisterial book that followed metaphysical actors throughout American history, Albanese showed how this tradition (to use her words) is "at least as important as evangelicalism in fathoming the shape and scope of American religious history and identifying what makes it

³Leigh Schmidt. 2005. *Restless souls: The making of American spirituality*. New York: HarperCollins; Olson, Laura R. 2010. Who are the 'spiritual but not religious'? *The Immanent Frame*. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/08/04/who-are-the-spiritual/> (accessed July 1, 2013).

⁴See for example Daniel Stone, "Newsweek poll: Americans' Religious Beliefs," accessed at <http://www.newsweek.com/newsweek-poll-americans-religious-beliefs-77349>. Pew data on the "spiritual but not religious" can be found at:

http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-notreligious/?utm_content=buffer6bcda&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

⁵Butler, Jon. 1990. *Awash in a sea of faith: Christianizing the American People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Owen, Alex. 2004. *The place of enchantment: British occultism and the culture of the modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Oppenheim, Janet. 1985. *The other world: Spiritualism and psychical research in England, 1850–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Heelas, Paul and Linda Woodhead. 2005. *The spiritual revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell

distinctive.”⁶ She analyzed many understudied movements and metaphysical believers and discussed the reasons they had been left out of the story.

She also helpfully defined the metaphysical tradition by identifying four key aspects of it: (1) an interest in the Divine Mind and powers of the mind; (2) a belief in correspondences between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between earthly and heavenly realms, between the individual soul and God; (3) a preoccupation with energy movement and balancing, with divine energies that pulse within nature and all of us; and (4) a focus on salvation as a way of using divine energies to heal and restore. Albanese and others studying the metaphysical tradition also have emphasized its eclectic and combinative nature.⁷ Metaphysical themes and emphases seem easily combined with (usually liberal) Christian and Jewish religious commitments.

Albanese’s book was helpful in shedding light on this eclectic tradition, but it still remains in the shadows, in part because it lacks features that scholars usually associate with religious traditions. While metaphysical believers may be united by common perspectives and characteristic preoccupations, they do not have set doctrines or practices. They also are not institutionalized as other groups are, and they thus lack the social connections and affiliations that help scholars identify them. Indeed, many of them overlap with the “spiritual but not religious” group—a group that also eschews institutions and organizations. Even the metaphysical God is elusive: The metaphysical God is an impersonal energy field, and metaphysical beliefs about this God can also be energetic and in motion. For all these reasons, metaphysical believers, with their fuzzy and effervescent spirituality, can be hard to pin down.

This book is an effort to pin them down—to understand their internal diversity, their beliefs and preoccupations, and how and where they engage in religious practices. We begin with an ambitious attempt to understand better the demographic contours of metaphysical spirituality. In Chap. 1, Carol Ann MacGregor tries to understand more about this famously amorphous group by carefully examining surveys over the last 40 years. How many Americans believe in a metaphysical and energetic God rather than a personal God? How many Americans engage in religious practices that we could call metaphysical? What is the relationship of what we are calling metaphysical religion to overlapping groups such as the New Age movement, those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious,” and those who have no religion? MacGregor arrives at several important conclusions, including the fact that metaphysicals often self-identify as either “Christian” or “Jewish,” that they often occupy spaces in-between religious groups, and that there is considerable evidence for the prevalence of metaphysical beliefs hidden away in a number of surveys. MacGregor also shows how many Americans engage in characteristically metaphysical practices such as energy healing, complementary and alternative

⁶Catherine Albanese. 2007. *Republic of mind and spirit: A cultural history of American metaphysical religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 4.

⁷Courtney Bender. 2010. *The new metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American religious imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

medical therapies, and yoga and meditation. At the end of this careful analysis, MacGregor points to better ways of understanding this elusive but powerful impulse in American religion.

The next chapter by Brett Grainger finds a single thread that links metaphysical speculation and practice over the last century and a half, namely the veneration of, and the sense of awe and wonder toward, nature. Grainger's chapter shows that metaphysical and New Age spirituality is not just about turning within, not just an unmooring from sources of authority outside the self, but instead a turning to nature as an authoritative source for spiritual knowledge. If MacGregor's chapter contextualizes metaphysicals within the contemporary USA, Grainger's contextualizes them within the history of ideas. Attempting to understand better metaphysical thought, Grainger isolates three important impulses—reimagining God as an immanent divine energy, reworking spiritual development as a process of harmonizing with spiritual energies, and developing worldviews that include teleological and holistic understandings of nature. These three impulses permeate metaphysical manifestoes and movements, and Grainger surveys them all, from nineteenth-century Romanticism and Theosophy to the 1960s counter-culture and contemporary nature mysticism. Grainger shows that even while many groups share these concepts, there are lingering tensions and ambiguities. Are metaphysicals focused on mind and its power or natural energies and the need to harmonize with them? Is the metaphysical worldview a dualism in which consciousness shapes matter or a monism in which everything is one energetic substance? These tensions will not be resolved in this decentralized and internally diverse tradition; but Grainger helps us understand these tensions and see how they have shaped the contested history of metaphysical ways of thinking.

Robert Fuller examines the implications of these tensions in a chapter that looks at probably the most notable feature of metaphysical religions—namely their focus on energetic healing practices. Fuller usefully contextualizes the rise of metaphysical healing practices as an alternative to western biomedicine, which many Americans today see as both too secular and too focused on the physical body. Americans are interested not just in the physical body but in the metaphysical energies undergirding it. Metaphysical healing systems that help people access these subtle energies span a range from chiropractic and Alcoholics Anonymous to acupuncture, Reiki, qigong, and chakra balancing. Ways of understanding, capturing, or manipulating these subtle energies vary. Chiropractors and New Age energy healers talk about a subtle nervous or energetic force in the body. Others focus on the power of light energy and ways of capturing it in crystals or moving it through the chakras. Still others borrow from ancient traditions to talk about this energy as qi (ch'i), prana, kundalini, or ojas. Fuller examines these developments as well as the home-grown American varieties of metaphysical healing, which include Christian Science, New Thought, mind cure, and New Age positive thinking, all of which promote the view that thoughts are real forces in the world. Thoughts shape one's inner, mental and outer, embodied reality. Fuller provides a remarkable overview of a large group of Americans who, finding biblical religion too doctrinal and scientific

materialism too limiting, have embraced metaphysical healing practices in order to find optimism, happiness, and wellness.

Attempting to understand better the eclectic settings in which metaphysicals and other spiritual seekers gather, Sarah Pike examines a new “kind of spiritual topography” in the USA comprising outdoor, transformational festivals and ecstatic dance gatherings. Paying close attention to how metaphysicals emphasize not just ethereal metaphysics but an enlightened body, Pike examines how metaphysicals tune the body in transformational music festivals that use musical vibration to forge community, elevate consciousness, and harmonize with the environment. Music festivals are not the only way to embody subtle metaphysical vibrations, however. In ecstatic dance groups and raves, participants show that communal dancing can change not just one’s own body and spirit but also the collective consciousness of the planet. In these settings, dancing constitutes a new kind of communal, ritual prayer that refigures the body and spirit and forges community. Like other metaphysicals, festival-goers forge their new identities and practices by borrowing from other cultures and religions, and Pike carefully parses these forms of appropriation as well as how metaphysicals themselves think about cultural borrowing. A final aspect of festival culture examined here is “going green” and the link that metaphysicals make between nature, spirit, and environmentalism. This link is examined in other essays as well, including Grainger’s.

In Chap. 5, Andrea Jain writes in sophisticated ways about metaphysical religion, consumer culture, and the power dynamics involved in cultural appropriation. Well aware of the criticism of eclectic metaphysical seekers, Jain suggests that Americans can appropriate from others, participate in consumer culture, and be sincerely religious at the same time. Jain looks in particular at how metaphysicals borrow from Native American and South Asian traditions. She shows that metaphysical religion today depends on a history of complicated exchanges—exchanges involving information, spiritual practices such as yoga, and even products like books and clothing. More than other religious traditions, the metaphysical tradition is self-consciously accretive and eclectic, combining elements not just from white Americans but from India and Native American teachers. The disturbing and problematic ways that white westerners have attempted to control, dominate, or monetize are on display in this chapter; but Jain is able to see another dimension here as well, which is a key lesson of the metaphysical present—that religious traditions are always in motion and internally diverse, and that they are always enmeshed in networks of desire, exchange, and consumption.

These chapters are different paths into a new and influential religious group that is internally diverse, constantly in motion, and difficult to characterize with precision. For this reason, this book cannot be a definitive statement of the present configuration or future directions of metaphysical religion. In the spirit of this eclectic and rapidly changing community, we offer this book as a provisional, piecemeal, and even experimental analysis of an important impulse in American culture that has often been ignored, misunderstood, or underestimated.