

# **GOLDEN RULE CHRISTIANITY: LIVED RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN MAINSTREAM**

by Nancy T. Ammerman

*This chapter is reprinted from the book *LIVED RELIGION IN AMERICA* edited by David Hall (1997), Pp. 196-216 with permission from the [Princeton University Press](#).*

*VANISHING BOUNDARIES*, the recently published book by Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens,<sup>1</sup> examines the religious lives of a cohort of baby boomers confirmed in Presbyterian churches in the 1950s and 1960s. The authors look for what has happened to them since and just what sort of religiosity, if any, they are practicing today. Among those who are currently connected to churches, a majority are what they call "lay liberals." This group scores low on "orthodox" Christian beliefs, such as traditional views about the Bible, believing that Jesus is the only way to salvation, and emphasizing the next world over this one. They are, by contrast, very this-worldly and do not think either that the Bible should be taken literally or that Christianity has a corner on the truth. They also attend church much less than others. For all these reasons, lay liberals do not get ringing endorsements from Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, nor from the many other sociologists and theologians who have recognized similar categories of non-orthodox churchgoers.<sup>2</sup> Implicitly, most observers seem to measure strength of belief and commitment against a norm defined by evangelicalism, equating that with "religiosity" and painting these non-exclusivist, less involved practitioners as simply lower on the scale. In this essay, I suggest that "lay liberals" are not simply lower on the religiosity scale. Rather, they are a pervasive religious type that deserves to be understood on its own terms.

I draw here on research originally undertaken as part of the "Congregations in Changing Communities" project, carried out under the auspices of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University, with funding from the Lilly Endowment, and reported in full in *Congregation and Community*. While that project was concerned with the responses of congregations to new institutional ecologies, it included attention to the individual religious lives of congregational members. Among the data we collected are survey responses from 1,995 individuals in 23 congregations and extensive observations of activities in those congregations. With the help of Edward Gray, I have also looked carefully at 103 of the over 300 interviews from the study. These include lay people in seventeen of the churches we studied.<sup>3</sup> Sixty percent of these were women, 20 percent were African American (the rest Anglo), and there was a fairly even distribution across the adult age spectrum. Fourteen percent were in Catholic churches, 54 percent in liberal Protestant churches, and 32 percent in evangelical Protestant churches. All the congregations and individuals are from within the Christian tradition, although one, First Existentialist in Atlanta,<sup>4</sup> recognizes that a substantial number of its members do not claim to be Christian. While the patterns I describe may hold in parallel form in other traditions, I cannot directly address that question with the data from this study.

## **TOWARD DEFINITION AND LOCATION**

The first step in describing the religiosity of "lay liberals" is to recognize what these people believe and practice. Their religiosity is not just a paler reflection of evangelical fervor, but different in kind. For that reason, I will not call them "lay liberals." Religious liberalism is usually taken to indicate the opposite end of a scale that is anchored by evangelicalism. That, in turn,

indicates that the primary differences we should observe are differences in the certainty with which people hold traditional beliefs: evangelicals are relatively certain, whereas liberals have rejected or reinterpreted traditional ideas about the Bible, Christ's divinity, the second coming, and the like. What I want to suggest, however, is that this category of religious persons is best defined not by ideology, but by practices. Their own measure of Christianity is right living more than right believing. What Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens found, in fact, was that these Christians are characterized by a basic "Golden Rule" morality and a sense of compassion for those in need. It is those practices of doing good and caring for others that we highlight here.<sup>5</sup>

As we looked at the interviews from our study, across all the demographic and ideological categories, the most frequently mentioned characterization of the Christian life was that people should seek to do good, to make the world a better place, to live by the Golden Rule. A smaller group of people - mostly those in evangelical churches - defined the Christian life in terms of being saved, but even those people also talked about the importance of living by the principles taught in the Bible, chief among them the Golden Rule.

**TABLE 1**  
Orientations to Christian Life by Congregation

	<i>Activist</i>	<i>Golden Rule</i>	<i>Evan-gelical</i>	<i>N=</i>
"Mainline" Protestant				
Hinton UMC, Dacula (suburban Atlanta)	0%	88%	12%	34
Brighton Evangelical Congregational (Boston)	0%	80%	20%	10
Carmel UMC (suburban Indianapolis)	15%	76%	9%	175
Epworth UMG (Atlanta)	13%	67%	20%	30
Good Shepherd Lutheran (Oak Park, Ill.)	31%	63%	6%	67
Incamarion Episcopal (Atlanta)	31%	61%	8%	72
<i>Activist</i>				
Holman UMC (Los Angeles)	33%	47%	20%	147
First Congregational (Long Beach, Calif.)	49%	49%	2%	77
First Existentialist (Atlanta) <sup>a</sup>	79%	17%	4%	48
Catholic				
St. Lawrence (suburban Atlanta)	15%	75%	10%	206
St. Catherine's (Boston) <sup>b</sup>	27%	62%	11%	26
St. Matthew's (Long Beach, Calif.)	32%	60%	8%	73
Evangelical				
Grace (independent Baptist, Anderson, Ind.)	8%	11%	81%	100
City (independent Baptist, Oak Park, Ill.) <sup>b</sup>	4%	21%	75%	82
Northview Christian Life (Assemblies of God) (suburban Indianapolis)	6%	34%	60%	65
South Meridian Church of God (Anderson, Ind.)	5%	39%	56%	168
Berean Seventh-Day Adventist (Los Angeles)	6%	38%	56%	71
<u>Hope Baptist (National Baptist, Atlanta)<sup>b</sup></u>	<u>14%</u>	<u>45%</u>	<u>41%</u>	<u>49</u>

<sup>a</sup> This congregation is loosely affiliated with the Unitarians, but sees itself as only marginally Christian. <sup>b</sup> These congregations asked for anonymity. These are not their real names.

In our surveys, we also asked people to tell us how important various practices were to "living the Christian life," as well as what they thought their church's top priorities ought to be. Taking those two lists together, one can identify three clusters of responses. The largest (51 percent of the total of 1,564 respondents for whom we have complete information) we might call "Golden Rule Christians." It includes people who say that the most important attributes of a Christian are caring for the needy and living one's Christian values every day. The most important task of the church, they say, is service to people in need. They can be distinguished from two other groups. On one side stand more evangelically oriented respondents, comprising 29 percent of the total. They emphasize prayer, Bible study, and witnessing as key Christian practices and, correspondingly, want their churches to give attention to evangelism and helping them resist the temptations of this world, while preparing for the world to come. On the other side are the activists, 19 percent of the total, who emphasize social action and working for justice.<sup>6</sup>

Nine of the eighteen congregations on which we have complete data have majorities of Golden Rule-oriented Christians. But, as table 1 shows, these three types are spread throughout the congregations. Not surprisingly, evangelical Protestant congregations have larger contingents of members who are evangelically oriented, but four of the six evangelical churches have substantial minorities of people who think Golden Rule principles are more important than evangelism. Similarly, in two of the three congregations we identified as "activist," there are substantial minorities of members who put a simple good life ahead of trying to change the world. In almost every congregation, there is appreciable diversity in orientation. Less than half have no minority contingent above 25 percent. And only two - one activist and one evangelical--have fewer than 20 percent who see the Golden Rule as the guiding principle for their lives.

Two of the congregations that are most clearly dominated by Golden Rule Christians are Carmel United Methodist Church, in the suburbs of Indianapolis, and St. Lawrence Catholic parish, in the suburbs of Atlanta. Carmel UMC is as old as the town---over 150 years old--and has grown dramatically as Carmel has been transformed from small town to suburb. It sits on a principal highway with a lovely colonial-style sanctuary, and many of those who move to town make at least one visit to inspect its worship services and programs. They find a full round of activities, especially for children, and worship with polished musical offerings and stimulating sermons. Many decide to stay; the average number of Sunday worshipers at two services totals about six hundred.

St. Lawrence, on the other hand, is brand-new. Twenty years ago, there were barely enough Catholics in Gwinnett County, northeast of Atlanta, to organize a parish. Since then, they have not only organized; they have built a dramatic new building, and are but one of several very large Catholic parishes in the county. Today, there are about one thousand people in the various weekend Masses in St. Lawrence's open, semicircular worship space. As the priest strolls the aisles during the opening portion of the service, greeting visitors, he is likely to tell them about the many family-oriented activities from which they can choose if they make St. Lawrence their home parish. His homily, delivered in equally informal style, is likely to remind them of the importance of loving both others and themselves.

As these congregations suggest, Golden Rule Christianity has an identifiable social location. All but two of the congregations with majorities of this type are also solidly middle-class (the exceptions being the Boston churches), and four of the six suburban churches in our study are dominated by Golden Rule religiosity. What I am describing may in fact be the dominant form of

religiosity among middle-class suburban Americans. It certainly is among the middle-class suburban Americans in our study. It is their form of "lived religion." Urban congregations were more likely than suburban ones to be activist, while our evangelical congregations are located in all sorts of settings.

Of the individuals who completed our surveys, Golden Rule Christians, on average, have finished college and have family incomes of about \$50,000. (On these measures they are very much like the activists.) They stand in contrast, however, to evangelical Christians who have, on average, some college (but not a degree) and have family incomes just under \$40,000. Golden Rule Christians are, then, located disproportionately in the suburbs, are slightly better educated, and are economically better off. They are people with the social resources for making their own choices rather than following a single orthodoxy or narrow institutional commitment.

Golden Rule Christianity is not, however, an exclusively White phenomenon. At the individual level, all of the ethnic groups represented among our respondents have similar levels of the three types of religiosity. At the congregational level, all four of the Black churches in our study have substantial numbers (from 38 percent to 61 percent) of Golden Rule Christians in them. While activism is certainly part of the heritage of the African American churches, there are also substantial numbers of these members who are less ambitious about changing the world.<sup>7</sup> Even when a church attempts to promote activism, protest and social justice may not be the primary reasons people attend.

Nor are these orientations defined by age or gender. Although the Golden Rule orientation puts a strong emphasis on "nurturing" activities, women are no more likely than men to say Christianity should be defined this way. Similarly, although women are sometimes thought to be more "orthodox" than men, that does not translate into a greater propensity to define the Christian life in terms of evangelical practices of Bible reading and witnessing. Taking these eighteen diverse congregations together, men and women of all ages are found, on average, in equivalent proportions in all three orientations.

Among the interviews we analyzed, older people were slightly more likely to include Golden Rule themes than younger people, but there were otherwise no consistent differences by age or gender. This is not, then, a "baby boomer" style of religion. Although Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens found a significant number of "Golden Rule" people among their baby boomers,<sup>8</sup> our data indicate that they would have found just as many if they had interviewed the parents. Indeed, the emphasis on a "good life" above any other religious distinctives (either pietist Bible reading and prayer or activist work for social justice) is reminiscent of the religion of the 1950s. It was celebrated by Will Herberg as the triumph of the American melting pot, and it was bemoaned by others as the triumph of triviality and irrelevance.<sup>9</sup> In 1951, Joseph Fichter described the Catholic parishioners he studied thus: "the practical ideology of the parishioners is in approximate balance with their actual behavior patterns, while both of them are at considerable distance from the complete Christian ideology of the Catholic Church."<sup>10</sup> They might not have known the finer points of the catechism, but they had a guiding moral philosophy by which they lived.

## **GOLDEN RULE BELIEFS**

That guiding moral philosophy is not unrelated to traditional religious beliefs and texts. For Golden Rule Christians, it is grounded in the Bible, but certainly not in a literal reading of it. We

asked our survey respondents about their view of the Bible, offering them a wider-than-usual range of possible responses. As table 2 shows, activists are slightly more "liberal" than Golden Rule Christians, while evangelicals are a good deal more "conservative." However, people with all three orientations hold every possible position on the Bible. Slightly more than a quarter of the evangelicals take "liberal" positions on the Bible, while a roughly equal number of the Golden Rule group takes the "conservative" position of calling the Bible inerrant or inspired. Given only those alternatives for beliefs about the Bible, however, the Golden Rule Christians would have looked very unorthodox (as they do in most studies). If we concentrated solely on beliefs and divided positions on the Bible along these liberal-conservative lines, we might see the "culture war" that so many claim characterizes American religion.<sup>11</sup>

**TABLE 2**  
**Views of Scripture by Orientation**

	<i>Activist</i>	<i>Golden Rule</i>	<i>Evangelical</i>
The Bible is.. .			
the inspired Word of God, without error not only in matters of faith, but also in historical, scientific, geographic, and other secular matters.	7%	15%	53%
the inspired, authoritative Word of God that is without error in all that it says about faith and morals.	6%	14%	21%
the Word of God, and its stories and teachings provide a powerful motivation as we work toward God's reign in the world.	40%	42%	18%
the record of many people's experience with God and is a useful guide for individual Christians in their search for basic moral and religious teachings.	37%	28%	8%
an important piece of literature, but is largely irrelevant to our lives today.	10%*	1%	1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	100% N -- 284	100% N = 750	101% N = 500

*\*A substantial portion of the activists who gave this response are in the Unitarian congregation that includes many who do not call themselves Christian.*

However, if we take those "liberal" positions on the Bible as genuine alternative beliefs--not a rejection of orthodoxy, but a different orthodoxy--we may see something different. Note that nearly half of the activists and Golden Rule Christians said that the Bible's "stories and teachings provide a powerful motivation as we work toward God's reign in the world." Another quarter of the Golden Rule Christians (and a higher proportion of activists) said the Bible is a "useful guide for individual Christians in their search for basic moral and religious teachings." Almost no one was ready to throw the Bible out as "irrelevant." Among the interviews we analyzed, about one-quarter, spread equally across different types of respondents, specifically

mentioned the Bible as important to their own lives and to what they think their children should learn. Just because they do not accept traditional definitions of inspiration or inerrancy does not mean that they have no use for Scripture.<sup>12</sup> Like the rest of their religious life, their use of Scripture is defined more by choices and practice than by doctrine. They draw from Scripture their own inspiration and motivation and guidance for life in this world. Their knowledge of Scripture may not be very deep, but they have at least some sense that the Bible is a book worth taking seriously, especially as a tool for making one's own life and the life of the world better.

Everything we have seen thus far tells us that developing a coherent theological system is not what Golden Rule Christians are concerned about. Even the notion of salvation is a bit fuzzy in their minds. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens found that their lay liberals were rather uninterested in conversations about the "meaning of life." What I want to suggest, in fact, is that "meaning" for Golden Rule Christians consists not in cognitive or ideological structures, not in answers to life's great questions, but in practices that cohere into something the person can call a "good life." William McKinney refers to this group of people as believers in the "cult of the good person."<sup>13</sup> The description is apt and corresponds to their own words. As one member of Carmel United Methodist Church put it: "I think all He [God] stands for makes you hope that you could be a better person." Said another, when asked to describe the essence of God: "[It's] the way you live your life. By that I mean, what good is it to know God if--you can study, you can be an excellent Bible student, but if you don't practice what you have learned, then you aren't making a better world for yourself or for anyone." The members of St. Lawrence agree. In the class for new members, a discussion of salvation concluded that it was not a one-time experience, but a continuing process of demonstrating with your life the value of what you have learned about God. A small-town newspaper put it this way: "[We] are proud to be labeled a 'Christian' newspaper. We take that to mean readers perceive us as a caring establishment that tries its best to uplift the community."<sup>14</sup> I can imagine similar themes emerging in the eulogies given for admired members of these communities.

## **GOLDEN RULE PRACTICES**

What is this good life for which Golden Rule Christians aim? Most important to Golden Rule Christians is care for relationships, doing good deeds, and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for people in need. Their goal is neither changing another's beliefs nor changing the whole political system. They would like the world to be a bit better for their having inhabited it, but they harbor no dreams of grand revolutions.

The emphasis on relationships among Golden Rule Christians begins with care for friends, family, neighborhood, and congregation. In the neighborhood, they value friendliness and helpfulness. Many of these folk know what it is to be mobile and therefore what adjusting to life in a new location involves. "Doing unto others" means welcoming newcomers and offering routine neighborly assistance. Beyond such routine care, they are also convinced that a good person invests in relationships. That means being open and vulnerable, working through difficulties, being there during the hard times. Younger people may talk about building relationships on honesty, openness, and caring.<sup>15</sup> But older people talk about church in similar relational terms. Among those we interviewed, older people were especially likely to describe the church as like a family, a place where people care for each other in times of need. When people of all ages talked about being dissatisfied with a church, it was rarely over doctrinal disagreements, but often over the failure of a congregation to care for someone in need.<sup>16</sup>

This emphasis on caring also defines their picture of God. Just as our interviewees' most common description of the Christian life was living by the Golden Rule, so the most common description of God was as a protector and comforter. God was experienced most often in moments of need. Even beyond times of crisis, these church members talked about seeing God's presence in the ways "things just work out" or feeling more confident about everyday challenges because they know God will care for them.<sup>17</sup> Among the survey respondents, preferred images of God included savior, comforter, and father.<sup>18</sup> These pictures of God as loving, caring, comforting, and protecting largely transcended ideological lines. They are characteristic of Golden Rule Christians, but they are by no means alien to the evangelicals and activists in our study.

These images of God and of the Christian life also have consequences for congregational programming. Both Carmel and St. Lawrence have various formal and informal counseling ministries. Carmel has someone on staff whose primary responsibility is counseling. St. Lawrence sponsors "Stephen's Ministries," a program that is cropping up in various denominations throughout the country. Lay people are trained as "caregivers," taught how to listen and encourage and make referrals when necessary. Even more important, both congregations provide an array of (optional) small fellowship groups.<sup>19</sup> At Carmel there are the usual Sunday school classes and ladies mission groups. At St. Lawrence there are traditional Catholic societies, such as the St. Vincent de Paul group. But in both there are also periodic study groups, fellowship activities, and mission projects. At St. Lawrence there is even an effort to adopt the "small faith communities" developed by Father Baranowski.<sup>20</sup>

Relationships with friends and fellow church members are important, then, but the relationship that perhaps defines the religiosity of Golden Rule Christians more than any other is the relationship of parent to child.<sup>21</sup> A quarter of the interviews we analyzed contained explicit statements linking faith to the upbringing of children. As Anne Brown and David Hall demonstrate (elsewhere in this collection) parents have persistently, throughout much of American history, sought the protection of faith and the good graces of the church for their children---even when they themselves were less than enthusiastic believers.<sup>22</sup> Golden Rule Christians are no exception. They are not in church *only* for their children (as we will see below), but religious training for their children is part of what they see as their obligation to the world. They would not be doing good or making the world a better place if their children were denied the training provided by the church.

The members of Carmel and St. Lawrence recognize, however, that bringing up children is not so easy these days. Stresses in family life are among the items of most concern to the Golden Rule Christians in these two affluent suburban congregations. They spoke often of care for spouse and children as very important to them. They worried about the demands of their jobs and how to balance work and family life. Among the relatively small proportion who participated in various Bible study or discipleship groups at the two churches, discussions about work and family decisions were frequent refrains. Although all of these people were comfortably situated, they worried about the excesses of materialism and said they were willing to consider material sacrifices in favor of the well-being of their families.

This emphasis on caring relationships tends to mean a certain narrowness in the circle of care occupied by Golden Rule Christians. Such a level of intense commitment could not be maintained over a wide domain. It is focused primarily on family, friends, neighborhood, and church. It is, in Stephen Warner's terms, parochial, but an "elective parochialism," chosen rather than ascribed.<sup>23</sup> In some cases, there may be a certain defensiveness in its narrowness,

an attempt at protection from threatening "others" who occupy the rest of the urban landscape.<sup>24</sup> In other instances, it may more properly be seen as an attempt to create a community in which mobile people can be rooted. It is a narrow circle, but it is characterized by genuine engagement and caring. Unlike the "moral minimalism" M.P. Baumgartner ascribes to suburbia, these Golden Rule Christians have carved out a space in which the indifference of the suburbs is limited, in which both caring and conflict are possible because the bonds of community are being tended more attentively than those in the larger suburban milieu.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, Golden Rule Christianity seems to have at least some impact on the other domains Golden Rule Christians inhabit. Religiosity is not, for them, utterly "private." In business and in the community, they value honesty, believing that good people give an honest day's work and do not try to cheat others. They say that their faith also means that they treat their co-workers and clients with more care than do others who are not religious.<sup>26</sup> Other studies have found that members of "mainline" Protestant and Catholic churches see their faith as providing them with principles by which they can make ethical decisions at work.<sup>27</sup> While they may not be eager to talk about religious issues while they are at work, and they might find it hard to articulate any coherent theological sense of "vocation," they claim that the practices they put at the center of the Christian life inform their everyday economic and civic activities.<sup>28</sup>

For most Golden Rule Christians, especially those in the suburbs, most of the really big problems of the world lie beyond the everyday world. They have little hope that anything very fundamental will change in the larger world, but they are more than willing to do what small things they can to ameliorate the suffering. Their efforts usually consist of donations and volunteer activity. They give food and clothing to food pantries and clothes closets, and contribute money to charitable causes of all sorts. Some of them spend time working in a senior center or on a soup line or in other volunteer activity. Wuthnow found that nearly half of regular American churchgoers had done some volunteer work at their own church or synagogue, and almost 40 percent had done some other charitable work in the community.<sup>29</sup> The Golden Rule respondents to our survey say that they participate in "community/social ministries" on average "a few times a year."

What I have described so far is a set of caregiving practices that extends from family to neighborhood to larger community. They are practices based in a generalized Christian ethic that calls for people to "love one another" and treat others as they would wish to be treated. Among Golden Rule Christians, these practices are explicitly nonideological, and those two factors taken together lead to another of the characteristics of this mode of religiosity--its tolerance.<sup>30</sup> Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens found that their "lay liberals" were not insistent that Christianity is the only way to salvation, and they are certainly not likely to proselytize. Caregivers in the Stephen Ministry at St. Lawrence talked about seeking to foster spirituality, but not trying to push the Catholic Church with those they counseled. Less than half of all our Golden Rule-style respondents say they ever participate in "seeking converts or new members" for their church. Indeed, members of both Carmel and St. Lawrence specifically mentioned tolerance for diversity as a virtue of their faith tradition. Methodists noted that Methodism (at least in their view) does not impose a rigid creed on its members, and Catholics talked about the diversity of spiritual experience among Catholics--from visions of Mary to charismatic renewal to ordinary Mass-going. They like being part of a church that leaves room for people with different beliefs and experiences.

The basis for unity, then, is an ethic rather than dogma, a principle long acknowledged by ecumenical organizations. In the early years of the Federal Council of Churches, leaders chose

to emphasize "the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man," to concentrate on achieving a kind of pragmatic unity through the pursuit of "social gospel" reforms, rather than any doctrinal unity or actual church union.<sup>31</sup> More recently, theologian Leo Lefebure has noted that efforts toward interreligious dialogue seem to be helped by the assumption that "there is a fundamental ethical structure on which very diverse religions can come to at least limited agreement apart from special claims of revelation." Citing the declaration "Toward a Global Ethic" issued by the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, he notes that at its center "is the Golden Rule, a principle of wisdom found in various forms in different religions."<sup>32</sup> Those who work from such "principles of wisdom" (practices) rather than from explicit revealed dogma have ground on which to meet. The Golden Rule Christians in our study and the "lay liberals" described by Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens seem to be attempting such a nondogmatic and tolerant ethic.

## **GOLDEN RULE RELIGION**

If Golden Rule Christians are characterized by their moral practices and their lack of creed, why call them Christian (or even religious) at all? Could they not be doing all these things based on an ethic generally available in the culture, the sort of generalized value system Talcott Parsons thought Christianity had become anyway?<sup>33</sup> Are they the perfect proof for secularization theory? They have, after all, given up particularistic beliefs in the face of pluralism, reducing religion to a rather universalistic morality. Could they not be members of a lodge or community club just as easily as of a church?

There are at least two reasons to reject that argument. The first is that they themselves insist on joining churches. They may join community organizations as well, but they talk about how important it is to them to find and join a church. They know they could stay home on Sunday morning; they often do. And they have the resources and social connections to pursue friendships and good deeds through other organizational means. Among our survey respondents, in fact, Golden Rule Christians said they participate in church fellowship activities only a few times a year, on average, while they participate in civic and community groups once a month or more. On average, they find only one or two of their five closest friends in their congregation. Still, they claim that church membership and participation is important to them. Why? In part, it is habit. In part, it is conformity to community norms. But in large measure, it is an extension of their care for their families and communities. They simply see no other organization that puts caring for others so clearly at the center of its life.<sup>34</sup> They are eager for what churches can contribute to the task of bringing up their children and are convinced that churches offer something uniquely valuable not present in other kinds of community and social activities.

The more potent reason to reject Golden Rule Christianity as proof of secularization, however, is that Golden Rule Christians have not given up on transcendence. They were sometimes rather fuzzy on just what it is they experience, and they sometimes had to stop and think when we asked, but they almost always came up with answers to questions about their experience of God.<sup>35</sup> Some said that they feel close to God in Sunday worship, especially in the music and in the opportunity for quiet reflection. Nearly half of those whose interviews we analyzed mentioned some aspect of the worship service as important to them, as a time when they feel God's presence or find new insight and understanding for their lives.<sup>36</sup> Many mentioned the music, and some mentioned Communion. A few mentioned sermons.<sup>37</sup> The parts of the service that involved participation and introspection seemed most important. The church's "sacred space," along with the "sacred time" set aside for worship, seems to combine for many into an opportunity to set priorities in order, to "feed the soul" (as a few put it), and to

know that they have been in a presence greater than themselves.

In addition to church, those we talked with often mentioned special places in nature and critical moments in the life cycle as evocative for them. Some had been to retreat centers or had been to special religious events when they needed to put life into perspective. Others mentioned experiences with their children - births, for example - or moments near the end of their parents' lives. One man reflected, "I think He [God] has always been a big part of our life, our married life, and our kids' lives. I think our kids had a lot to do with making Him more real to us, and personalizing Him." As these people encounter the power and grandeur of nature and the mystery of life's formative moments, they again sense that something beyond themselves is present.

Not surprisingly, they also sense this presence in times of special difficulty. Many of those we interviewed mentioned times of sickness and death as moments of particular closeness to God. Rather than eliciting questions or existential anger, these trials seemed to allow Golden Rule Christians to draw on a reservoir of spiritual energy. As one woman put it, "It just seems to me that when I need something, or when things are really difficult and they get worked out tight, it's just like somebody had to be helping you do it." An evangelical Christian might have quoted Romans 8:28, "All things work together for good." A Golden Rule Christian is no less sure of God's presence, just less precise in describing it.

The lack of language for describing God (and perhaps even the lack of any discernible ideological center at all) can be linked at least in part, I think, to low rates of participation in church activities, especially in small groups. Golden Rule Christians have little opportunity for developing a sustained religious vocabulary. At both Carmel United Methodist and St. Lawrence parish, those who do participate in Bible study groups, prayer groups, ministry groups, discipleship groups, and the like, were often quite adept in talking about their lives in explicitly religious language.<sup>38</sup> Our Golden Rule Christians, however, only participate in Bible study groups, on average, several times a year. Many never do. Their usual mode of church participation is reasonably regular Sunday morning attendance, nothing more. While that time of worship may offer them a sense of God's presence, it does not offer opportunities for conversation with others about the role of religion in their everyday lives. This lack of ongoing religious conversation may undermine their ability to continue to practice their faith (and, ironically, to pass it on to their children).

## **GOLDEN RULE CONGREGATIONS**

Congregations dominated by Golden Rule Christians are clearly not the high-commitment, sectarian gatherings that some theorists claim are the strongest and most likely to succeed.<sup>39</sup> They do not offer their parishioners distinctive identities, and they do not ask for high levels of involvement. They are this-worldly, downplaying other-worldly rewards. Rather than generating a high level of rewards through the sacrificial contributions of all their members (minimizing the "free rider problem"), they generate rewards by gathering minimal contributions from large numbers of people Who engage in a good deal of "free riding." Are they therefore doomed to failure? I think not. Half of the people we surveyed define their faith more in terms of everyday morality than in terms of institutional commitment or theological orthodoxy. They would be likely to find a high-commitment sectarian congregation uncongenial. They value the choices they have in how they spend their time and do not believe that their eternal salvation depends on weekly church attendance. While they are less likely to create the sort of vibrant, high-reward communities more demanding groups may favor, they can create viable congregations. There

is, quite simply, a very large "market" for the sort of low-commitment congregations Golden Rule Christians favor.

What do they favor in a congregation? As we have seen in looking at the concerns of individual Golden Rule Christians, three things are essential: opportunities to serve (or contribute to serving) people in need, dynamic worship, and attractive activities for children. As would be expected from the emphasis on child-rearing, Golden Rule congregations are very child-centered. From a bright, pleasant nursery with competent workers, to children's choirs and confirmation classes, to regular teen social gatherings, a good deal of the congregation's energy and money goes into "family-centered" activities. Over and over, when we asked people why they chose a given church, they said they were looking for a place that would be good for their children.

But the parents also want a place where the worship is meaningful for themselves. Both St. Lawrence and Carmel UMC devote a good deal of energy to the planning and execution of worship. At Carmel, where music is important, the choir polishes multiple offerings, and there are often vocal and instrumental solos, too. Sermons are imaginative retellings of biblical stories in light of current situations. They are filled with skillful turns of phrase and insightful use of contemporary literature. Worship leaders at St. Lawrence also give attention to music and sermons, but the Catholic tradition of singing and preaching has a less rich heritage on which to draw. What makes worship at St. Lawrence exciting is the ever-changing pattern of lay and clergy participation and the constant reinvention and reinterpretation of the symbols these Catholics bring with them from a variety of locations into this newly Catholic place. Old traditions about when to kneel, who serves the Eucharist and how, what symbols will be used to celebrate the seasons of the church year take on new meaning as this congregation creates its own heritage.

Finally, Golden Rule Christians want their churches to be involved in serving the community. They like the idea of hosting food pantries or organizing work teams to help elderly people care for their homes. They want the church to collect money to send in times of disaster. They may even participate in tutoring programs or home-building efforts (usually in communities other than their own). Congregations are effective centers for such service activities. They can provide a support structure (space, equipment, mailing lists) for all sorts of volunteer activity and fundraising. Robert Wuthnow has shown that people generally trust churches to use their money well: "They may not know how government programs work, or they may not know what happens when they send a check to United Way, but their congregation is small enough that they can feel directly involved and see the fruits of their labors."<sup>40</sup> While Golden Rule Christians may be involved in service activities beyond their churches, they see the church as a primary means through which they leave the world a better place.

## **SUMMARY**

What I am arguing is that there is a pervasive style of religiosity in the United States today that needs to be better understood. While theologians might want to argue that the people I have termed "Golden Rule Christians" have no coherent theology, and evangelists might worry about their eternal souls, sociologists cannot afford to dismiss a form of lived religion just because it does not measure up to orthodox theological standards. Using the twenty-three congregations in our study (as well as impressionistic evidence from a variety of other sources), it is clear that Golden Rule Christianity is far too prevalent to ignore.

It is also probably not new. While I do not have long-term trend data on which to draw, I am struck by the consistency between what I have described here and what David Hall describes in his history of religion in seventeenth-century New England. He notes that "common sense instructs us that religion (or the church) attracts not only a committed core, but also others who, like 'horse-shed' Christians [those who skip the pastor's Bible teaching to spend part of their Sunday mornings in the horse-shed discussing secular matters], limit their commitment." They were more committed to living a good life, he argues, than to particular Calvinist doctrine.<sup>41</sup> Jon Butler closes his book, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, with a description of Abraham Lincoln's religion—on the one hand, undeniably deep and pious, but on the other hand, clearly unorthodox and institutionally uncommitted: "Lincoln's religion, then, paralleled that of many of his contemporaries. He faced innumerable religious choices. He understood much of Christianity's appeal. He eschewed church membership and resisted practices and doctrines that distinguished contemporary Christianity.... [He] represented the ambivalent spiritual inclinations among America's heterodox citizens."<sup>42</sup> According to Butler, America has always been characterized by a strong strain of unorthodox, yet deeply spiritual religiosity. It is this same unorthodox-yet-spiritual morality that made possible the nineteenth-century cultural success of moralistic novels, Chautauqua, and other religious diversions. By concentrating on basic ethical values and dilemmas, commercial innovators marketed religious products far beyond sectarian bounds.<sup>43</sup> Throughout the history of religion in the United States, something resembling Golden Rule Christians seems to have been a fact of life.

I have argued here that the Golden Rule Christianity we see today is explicitly nonideological. That is, it is not driven by beliefs, orthodox or otherwise. Rather, it is based in practice and experience. God is located in moments of transcendence and in the everyday virtues of doing good. Golden Rule Christianity emphasizes relationships and caring. The good person invests heavily in care for family (especially children) and friends, tries to provide friendly help in the community, and seeks ways to make the larger world a better place. All the while, the ideas of others are respected. Proselytizing is frowned upon, and tolerance is celebrated.

Despite the absence of an extensive theological meaning system, I have also argued that Golden Rule Christians are not utterly unreligious. They still identify with religious institutions, and they find themselves with some regularity in the presence of "something bigger," something most of them are quite willing to call "God." They come to church, at least in part, to find the sacred space and time in which those encounters occur.

The congregations they prefer, then, are likely to be shaped by the need for reflective time, as well as by an emphasis on child-rearing and community service. Congregations are not the only social institution to which Golden Rule Christians belong. These people are likely to have many allegiances and friendships outside their particular congregations, but that does not necessarily mean that their religiosity is constrained to a small slice of life. On the contrary, much of their everyday activity is shaped by Golden Rule religious practices, and those practices are grounded in the stories of Scripture and the experiences of worship and transcendence. If we begin to recognize the dimensions of this Golden Rule mode of religiosity, we may also begin to recognize the ways in which modern religion has more pervasive effects than we might have thought.

## NOTES

The idea for this essay originated in discussions at the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University, while I was a visiting faculty member there in 1993-94. My thanks go also to Robert Orsi and Charles Hambrick-Stowe for their comments at the "Lived Religion" Conference at Harvard Divinity School in September 1994. I have since benefited from careful comments by Nancy Eiesland and David Hackett and from discussion in the American Religion "Brown Bag" group at Emory and in the Congregational Studies Project Team. The role of Edward Gray is noted in the text, but deserves elaboration. He carefully culled the transcripts from the project for material relevant to the faith being practiced by the individuals we had interviewed. I am grateful for all of these colleagues.

1. Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

2. Rodney Stark argues that this-worldly religions are destined to extinction, always being replaced by stronger, other-worldly groups that offer the unique "compensators" that only religion can offer. See Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). The implications of this essay for that argument are taken up below. The people I call "Golden Rule Christians" are the people rational choice theorists would call "free riders."

3. Because we originally focused on congregational issues, and because the interviews were not uniform across the various researchers who conducted them, not all of the people we interviewed talked about their personal faith.

4. All congregational names used in this essay are the actual names and locations, used with permission.

5. Among the many theorists who point us in the direction of studying practices are Wuthnow and Bourdieu. See Robert Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

6. These three categories were created using responses to two sets of questions from our questionnaire. One set asked respondents to rank a list of "qualities of a good Christian life" as "essential," "very important," "somewhat important," or "not at all important." The second asked for similar responses to a list of "priorities for your church's activities in the community." The "Golden Rule" items were a Christian life characterized by "taking care of those who are sick or needy" and "practicing Christian values in work, home, and school," plus a church that "provides aid and services to people in need." The activist items were a Christian life characterized by "actively seeking social and economic justice" and a church that "supports social action groups." The evangelical items were a Christian life characterized by "reading and studying the Bible regularly," "spending time in prayer and meditation," and "seeking to bring others to faith in Christ," plus a church committed to "encouraging members to share their faith," "helping members resist the temptations of the world," "an active evangelism program," and "preparing people for a world to come." Each respondent received a score based on the sum of his or her responses to each of these sets of items. Those scores were then weighted to make them equivalent, and those whose scores were highest on the activism scale were then categorized as activists, those highest on the evangelical scale as evangelicals, and those highest on the Golden Rule scale as Golden Rule Christians. Those whose scores were equal on the Golden Rule and either activist or evangelical scales were placed in the non-Golden Rule category. The four people whose scores were equal on the activist and evangelical scales were placed in the evangelical category (since they were all in evangelical churches), and the seventy-one people who had equal scores on all three scales were divided proportionately among the three

categories.

7. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, in *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 228, note that the political activism of the Black church tradition is always fraught with ambiguity. While a large majority of Black clergy think they should be involved in the community, not all are. Our data indicate that while many church members may support those goals, they put other Christian practices ahead of "seeking social and economic justice."

8. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (*Vanishing Boundaries*) never identify exactly how many fit their "lay liberal" category. They say simply that "most of the active Presbyterians we interviewed... give voice to a theological perspective that we call 'lay liberalism' ", (p. 112).

9. Will Herberg, in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1960), especially noted the "activism" of American religion, our conviction that we ought to be doing things to make the world better. He quotes Handlin, saying that Americans tend to believe that "ethical behavior and a good life, rather than adherence to a specific creed, [will] earn a share in the heavenly kingdom" (p. 83, quoting Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* [New York: Little, Brown, 1951, 128]). Among those who decried the narrowness of such religiosity were Gibson Winter, in *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961); and Peter L. Berger, in *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961)

10 Joseph H. Fichter, *Southern Parish: Dynamics of a City Church* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 270.

11. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

12. The slipperiness of questions about Bible beliefs is demonstrated in two recent studies. In an attempt to learn more about "lay liberals," the Presbyterian Research Office repeated some of the questions asked by Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens. They discovered a similar level of theological relativism among their respondents. However, they worry that these lay people may not be understanding "the questions in the same way we in Research do." As evidence, they cite responses to questions about the Bible. Seventy-two percent of those who agree that the Bible is "accurate in every detail" also say that the Genesis creation stories are not "a precise how and when." See Keith M. Wulff, "'Lay Liberals' and Theology Matters," *Monday Morning* 59 (October 10, 1994): 9-12. In a 1985 survey, fifty-six percent of Southern Baptists answered these same questions in the same way. See Nancy T. Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990). Such responses do tend to support the notion that most people take a position relative to the Bible that is not ideologically consistent.

13. Personal communication.

14. Editorial, *The Record Argus*, Greenville, Pa., December 24, 1994, 4.

15. This, of course, is an echo of the baby boomer patterns described in Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

16. Penny Becker's study of congregational conflict supports the centrality of this emphasis on caring. She found that congregations tended to place their conflicts within a communal logic that puts relationships above truth, process above outcome. See Penny Becker, "Politics and Meaning: Framing Gender Conflicts in Local Congregations," paper presented to the meetings of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Los Angeles, August 1994.

17. This is not the sort of "instrumental" religion Robert Althuser describes in "Paradox in Popular Religion: The Limits of Instrumental Faith," *Social Forces* 69, no. 2 (December 1990): 585-602. Many of those we interviewed did claim that people should go to church or be religious because it would be "good for them." But those did not seem to be the same people who talked about simply experiencing God's caring presence in their daily lives.

18. People with all three orientations place "savior" and "comforter" virtually tied at the top of

their list of images, although evangelicals do so with the highest rankings, followed by Golden Rule Christians and activists, in that order. Both evangelicals and Golden Rule Christians rank "father" as the next most desirable image, although again, the evangelical ranking is stronger. Activists choose "liberator" as their third most likely image.

19. See Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), for a study of such small groups. His ch. 8 pays special attention to their role in religious life.

20. For a description of such intentional faith communities among Catholics, see William V. D'Antonio, "Small Faith Communities in the Roman Catholic Church: New Approaches to Religion, Work and Family," in *Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Nancy Tatom Aremerman and Wade Clark Roof (New York: Routledge, 1995), 237-59.

21. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (*Vanishing Boundaries*) found that the presence of children is a strong predictor of who returns to church (p. 168). The continuing tie between congregational life and parenting is a recurring theme in Ammerman and Clark Roof, eds., *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*. See especially Penny Long Mailer, "Lost in the Fifties: The Changing Family and the Nostalgic Church," in that volume, pp. 23-60.

22. See the essay by Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall on family strategies and religious practices in this volume.

23. R. Stephen Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). See esp. 201-8.

24. Robert Orsi suggested this line of analysis in his comments on an earlier draft of this essay. This fortress mentality can be seen quite clearly among an older generation of parents who were the first to move to Carmel in the 1950s (and who have now left Carmel United Methodist over, among other things, its lack of clear boundaries).

25. See M. E Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

26. In her study of gender, work, and religion, Tracy Scott has discovered that explicit ideas about work as "calling" are very rare, but both liberal and conservative Protestants are nevertheless convinced that their faith matters. Across all categories, the most common response is that it shapes who they are and how they treat people. "What's God Got to Do with It? Protestantism, Gender, and the Meaning of Work in the United States" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, forthcoming).

27. Stephen Hart and David Krueger, "Faith and Work: Challenges for Congregations," *Christian Century* 109, no. 22 (July 15-22, 1992): 683-86.

28. In further study of another of our Golden Rule congregations, Nancy Eiesland has demonstrated the extent to which the ethos and connections created inside the congregation extend into other community organizations. See Nancy Eiesland, "A Particular Place: Exurbanization and Religious Response in a Small Town" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1995). For a similar argument about the role of presumably "privatized" religion in "public" life, see Nancy T. Aremerman, "Review of *A Bridging of Faiths* by N.J. Demerath and Rhys H. Williams," *Society* 31, no. i (November-December 1993): 91-93.

29. *God and Mammon in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), ch. 8. 30. In this respect, they do echo the "moral minimalism" Baumgartner describes in *Moral Order*. They are extremely reluctant to exercise any sort of social control.

31. See Robert A. Schneider, "Voice of Many Waters: Church Federation in the Twentieth Century," in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960*, ed. William R. Hutchison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 105-6.

32. Leo D. Lefebure, "The Wisdom of God: Dialogue and Natural Theology," *Christian Century* 111, no. 30 (October 26, 1994): 988.

33. Talcott Parsons, "Christianity in Modern Industrial Society," in *Sociological Theory and Modern Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

34. If Baumgartner (in *Moral Order*) is right about the "moral minimalism" of the suburbs, these Golden Rule Christians may seek church membership at least in part as a place where the bonds of social cohesion are somewhat stronger, where there are some moral claims to be made.

35. This ill-defined spirituality is reminiscent of the "seekers" Wade Clark Roof describes in *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1993). Like the "counterculture" Steven Tipton describes, they trust what they experience, not the rules or authorities of any system. They are seekers after a truth that will be intuitively known rather than pronounced. See Steven M. Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). However, the people we interviewed rarely talked about specifically seeking spirituality, other than in their commitment to participating in church worship services and occasional special events or retreats.

36. In an analysis of national survey data collected by Gallup, Marler and Roozen found that high on the list of reasons for joining a particular church are its "warmth" and "meaningfulness." See Penny Long Marler and David A. Roozen, "From Church Tradition to Consumer Choice: The Gallup Surveys of the Un-churched American," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1993), 94. Warmth certainly has to do with the caring relationships we have been describing, and meaningfulness includes spiritual experience and insight. Spirituality and relationships are key elements in church choice.

37. Robert Wuthnow notes, "Even in their preaching, their role is probably to remind people of the basic values contained in scripture and tradition or to give a brief time for people to reflect about their lives more than it is to impart an authoritative interpretation." See *Producing the Sacred* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 60.

38. Daniel Olson studied a small "discipleship" group in a liberal Methodist church. He found that their discussions "function much as they do in more conservative churches. There they are much like testimonies: they make the tradition more plausible and real." See Daniel V. A. Olson, "Making Disciples in a Liberal Protestant Church," in *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion*, ed. Robert Wuthnow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 146.

39. This is the "rational choice" model of religion elaborated in Laurence R. Iannaccone, "A Formal Model of Church and Sect," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (Suppl. 1988): 241-68; Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (March 1994): 1180-1211; and Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), among others. In their assertion that strict churches are strong, they are testing the hypotheses made famous by Dean M. Kelley, in *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977).

40. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, 214-15.

41. David Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 15.

42. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 295.

43. This is my reading of Laurence Moore's evidence in *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

We must think about this Golden Rule in terms of day-to-day living. Let's begin in the early morning, when you crawl out of bed and drag yourself to the bathroom. Someone was thoughtful enough to replace the roll of toilet paper which was emptied last night before going to bed. The toothpaste that you had squeezed dry is gone - in its place, a brand-new tube. There are clean towels on the towel rack. And as you turn on the faucet in the shower, you notice that the shower walls and glass doors have been dried by whomever went in before you.

Golden rule Christianity: Lived religion in the American mainstream. In D. Hall (Ed.), *Lived religion in America: Toward a history of practice* (pp. 196-216). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Google Scholar. Ammerman, N. T. (2001). *Doing good in American communities: Congregations and service organizations working together*. Retrieved November 20, 2001, from [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/about/about\\_orw\\_cong-report.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/about/about_orw_cong-report.html) Google Scholar. Ammerman, N. T. (2002). *Cooperative baptist fellowship*. In J. G. Melton & M. Baumann (Eds.), *Religions of the world: A comprehensive encyclopedia of beliefs* Next (Golden mean (philosophy)). The Golden Rule is a cross-cultural ethical precept found in virtually all the religions of the world. Also known as the "Ethic of Reciprocity," the Golden Rule can be rendered in either positive or negative formulations: most expressions take a passive form, as expressed by the Jewish sage Hillel: "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow neighbor. This is the whole Law, all the rest is commentary" (Talmud, Shabbat 31a). In Christianity, however, the principle is