



TV





only possible explanation. The recent decrease in religious participation is concentrated among young adults and has been attributed to the economic difficulties young adults experience: student loans, uncertainties about careers, the necessity of changing jobs and retraining for different occupations, corporations' increasing reliance on temporary labor, and uncertainties about health insurance, often coupled with credit card debt and geographic mobility— all of which are associated with delayed marriage and childrearing. The life courses of young adults thus deviate markedly from the settled family and neighborhood lifestyles around which many congregations have been built.<sup>9</sup> Were these factors not enough to explain young adults' disaffiliation from religion, researchers have also documented alienation induced by religious leaders who align themselves with political candidates and policies, especially on the right.<sup>10</sup> This evidence on the face of it therefore suggests that religious leaders seeking to curb what they regard as secularity by engaging in partisan politics may be harming rather than strengthening their own institutions.

The alignment of religious leaders with partisan politics is reason to be inter-

American religion that is distrustful of the wider society— an implication, incidentally, that corresponds with studies showing that social capital among White evangelical Protestants tends toward in-group bonding rather than bridging with outsiders. Other groups, including Jews, Roman Catholics, Christian Scientists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Muslims have been literally and figuratively embattled within the larger society as well, but White evangelical Protestants have been of particular interest in recent decades because of their apparent influence in electoral politics. Their sense of embattlement has perhaps increased as well, at least if diminishing membership matters. According to one estimate, the White evangelical Protestant population declined from 21 percent of the American population as recently as 2008 to only 15 percent in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

called, “I was frustrated with the way that the media was very agenda driven—and it’s on both sides. I feel like the coronavirus issue turned into something that was ‘party against party’ instead of one nation under God.”<sup>17</sup> Most religious leaders, especially mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy who were subject to denominational authorities, and thus did not typically have individual control of their messaging to their congregation, heeded health officials’ warnings. However, defiance of social distancing and mask wearing increased as the pandemic continued, with religious leaders especially of large predominantly White non-denominational evangelical congregations challenging the authority of governors to impose regulations and, in some cases, questioning health officials’ credibility.

White evangelical Protestants’ sense of themselves as an embattled minority illustrates another important dynamic in understanding the relationship of religion and trust: “Organized religion” is not one thing, as survey questions sometimes imply. Rather, organized religion in the United States is highly diverse, varying in tradition, theology, national origin, region, ethnicity, and race, which means that religious groups hold varying levels of trust or distrust toward institutions and one another. These variations may not be expressed specifically in the language of trust, but are evident in the frequent conflicts that have characterized religious groups throughout the nation’s history, including tensions between Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, and among Protestant denominations and sects. The recent decline in confidence toward organized religion, therefore, is likely in part to reflect distrust of religious groups toward one another, such as White evangelical Protestants who distrust liberal Protestants, and vice versa.

**N**arratives about what has gone wrong when trust is betrayed tend to expand in multiple directions that reflect religious communities’ varied concerns. These stories can also suggest what should be done to restore the trust that has been transgressed. If we take as examples the Swaggart scandal, the Willow Creek sexual harassment allegations, and the Catholic sex abuse cases, we see three of the most common means by which attempts are made to restore trust. Swaggart tearfully confessed to his congregation and television audience that he had sinned and asked God’s forgiveness. Willow Creek launched an independent advisory committee investigation that emphasized personal discipline, accountability, and administrative oversight. The Catholic sex abuse scandals extended over such long periods, included so many victims, and involved such a lack of transparency on the part of church officials that many of the cases resulted not only in laicization of clergy and the resignations of bishops, but in litigation and criminal prosecution.

In none of these three cases was the means employed entirely effective. Following his confession and a subsequent incident of sexual misconduct, Swaggart’s ministerial license was revoked by the Assemblies of God denomination he was af-





continued preaching, but not under Assemblies of God auspices, which demonstrates the Assemblies' rejection of his behavior. Willow Creek learned that it, like any large organization claiming to be trustworthy, needed to have formalized rules about handling allegations of sexual harassment. Catholic leaders, with varying amounts of credibility, sought to demonstrate that they were capable of exposing sex offenders and cooperating with the law in punishing them.

What religious leaders have done to restore trust, then, is not so different from how other institutions, including our political system, attempt to restore trust. Evoking confessions of wrongdoing can seem impossible in the political arena, but public pressure to depose untrustworthy leaders is an elemental part of the electoral process. So are investigations and litigation, as those surrounding the January 6, 2021, insurrection illustrate. Although these processes are often lengthy and bitterly contested, they are the means through which we attempt to call attention to mistrust. And as the examples in religion illustrate, these mechanisms facilitate valuable discussions of crucial social norms, even when trust itself is difficult to restore.

**T**he potential gains through confessions, investigations, and litigation notwithstanding, the decline of trust in religious institutions, coupled with dissention about who and who not to trust, is detrimental in the near



tions should be held, and presidents should be judged. Long-standing advocacy groups such as the ACLU and NAACP have been joined in recent years by groups such as the Clergy Emergency League, the (revived) Poor People's Campaign, the Interfaith Center for Public Policy, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, Vote Common Ground, and Black Lives Matter as well as by local and regional clergy councils and lay organizations that advocate for immigrant rights, affordable housing, and universal health insurance.

Pluralism means that advocacy groups in religion, just as in politics, will take different sides on issues and will directly challenge their adversaries' arguments. Pluralism is also operative when advocacy groups mobilize constituencies with divergent interests, as illustrated by some faith-based groups orienting their efforts toward immigrant rights while others focus on homelessness, racial reconciliation, or police reform. Apart from advocacy, pluralism is the condition that encourages institutions to work to restore trust. Leaders of religious organizations are motivated to restore trust because, in the absence of it, constituents will vote with their feet, taking advantage of a vastly diverse American religious landscape and choosing to worship elsewhere, or not worship at all. Attendees at Willow Creek can decamp to a different church if they no longer trust Willow Creek's leadership, and college students can opt to study somewhere other than Liberty University if its board of trustees does not restore the institution's trustworthiness. An amendment to the concept of pluralism, then, is that religious organizations do not have to attack one another as long as pluralism provides the opportunities for constituents to register their dissent by moving their loyalties to other organizations.

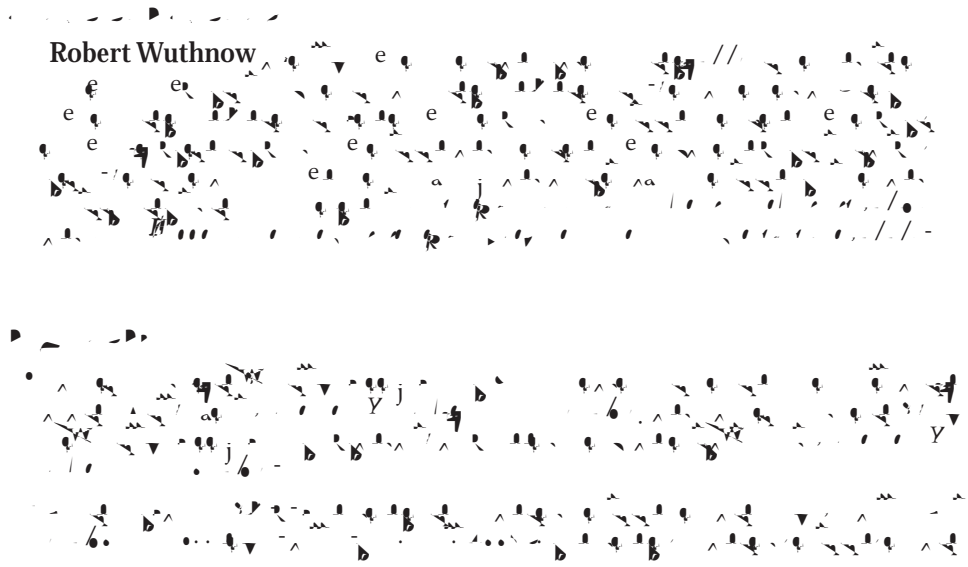
But without a basic level of trust among the parties involved, pluralism falters. Profound disagreements must include at least minimal agreement about the norms of involvement. Disputants must treat one another only as adversaries rather than as enemies, and disagreements must be negotiated within the law through legislation, the courts, and peaceful confrontations. There must be a basic threshold of trust that those with whom one disagrees will play by the rules of basic civility, adhering to norms of honesty and respect for well-established norms of human rights and freedoms. Despite serious disagreements, America's various faith communities have in the past generally exhibited adherence to these norms, even to the point of arguing less exclusively about divinely revealed truth than in terms of procedures and practicalities. In surveys, White evangelical, White mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish respondents rate each of the other groups warmly, if not quite as positively as they do their own, the exceptions being colder feelings toward Muslims and atheists.<sup>25</sup> More to the point, religious groups with widely divergent views about religious freedom, abortion, homosexuality, conscientious objection, welfare, immigration, and capital punishment— including advocacy groups that have formed to press for particular issues— have, with only a few exceptions, worked to achieve their goals through lobbying, voting, and the courts.

**T**he decline of trust in religious institutions has to be considered in terms other than the numbers documented in polls. Declining trust is an opening for religious and secular groups alike to fight for their convictions and, in so doing, clarify the operative social norms as well as the beliefs for which they stand. The fighting itself can be a good thing, bringing to the table alternative values and elevating the importance of clarifying those values. But it is the terms under which the fighting takes place that matters. The disputes must be conducted in good faith, expressing what people sincerely believe to be true and understanding that to disagree requires respect for those with whom one disagrees. The danger to religion, as well as to democracy, lies in cynical distortions of sincere convictions. Democracy is truly endangered when leaders refuse to believe that those with whom they disagree are worthy of the elemental trust that all deserve.

The task of restoring trust in basic institutions and of rejuvenating faith in American democracy is, at this moment in our nation's history, a high priority. Any hope that the United States can find common ground in the beliefs and practices that once inspired religion as a source of consensus is ill founded. The more likely scenario is that religious groups in alliance with or in opposition to one another, as well as in conjunction with secular groups, will either keep fighting for what they think is uniquely true or retreat into a privatized faith that encourages individuals to seek spiritual gratification in their own ways. Neither of these possibilities is very encouraging for the health of democracy. Especially when religious groups willingly dispute the basic facts of scientific medicine, endorse the false claims of political strategists, and deride people whose religious convictions differ from theirs—when religious groups fail to treat one another according to basic principles of trust and toleration—then religion functions more to facilitate authoritarianism than to support democracy.

For religious leaders to restore the public's and, indeed, their own members' trust in the religious institutions that have served America so well in the past, they certainly do not have to all agree on the important moral and social issues of the day. But they must be attentive to the basic principles within their own traditions of how to live amicably and respectfully among those with whom they disagree. Perhaps religious leaders can once again appreciate that their own traditions are strengthened by America's pluralism. And perhaps that realization can be a source of inspiration for upholding the underlying principles of law, trust, and common respect on which democracy is based.

Robert Wuthnow







FOR WEB- e