

Get Religion

We don't need more lawyers or financiers. We need a new clergy class.

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hen Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme was uncovered last fall, it dominated headlines. But when attorney Marc Dreier was sentenced in July to 20 years in jail for defrauding investors of more than \$400 million, *The New York Times* stuck the news on page A20. The three evening news broadcasts included segments on Sonia Sotomayor's confirmation hearings, the tangled relationship between the CIA and Dick Cheney, and a prison break in Indiana. But nothing on Dreier.

In the wake of the Madoff and A.I.G. scandals—and the exposure of a broader truth, that the pre-crash economy was actually a funhouse of illusion and deceit—Americans have grown desensitized to tales of corruption that would spark outrage in normal times. But with no end to job losses in sight and talk of a second stimulus turning serious, these are not normal times. Who can blame the country for wanting to change the channel on the economic crisis—and all that it has revealed?

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“Economic crisis” may be too euphemistic a phrase to describe what’s happened. The past 18 months have been about something deeper. Consider the death spiral of A.I.G., which was as powerful as any one factor in the collapse. As explained by Michael Lewis in *Vanity Fair*, the company’s Financial Products unit reaped huge profits by splicing consumer debt with subprime mortgages. “It’s hard to know what Joe Cassano [the leader of Financial Products] thought and when he thought it, but the traders inside A.I.G. F.P. are certain that neither Cassano nor the four or five people overseen directly by him, who worked in the unit that made the trades, realized how completely these piles of consumer loans had become, almost exclusively, composed of subprime mortgages,” Lewis writes. Cassano indeed deserves blame for his greed, but he’s hardly alone: For average consumers as much as for Cassano, easy debt, the kind offered by such products, was a road to larger consumption.

It was also a road to disaster. Our unquenchable thirst for material goods proved predictably unsustainable. If we are to emerge from the current morass as not merely a prosperous nation once again, but a better one, we will have to confront the crisis underlying the economic crisis: one of meaning, of which the economic crisis is but a symptom. We have shirked the most profound questions for the sake of a vulgar materialism. To the extent that it can restore a sense of meaning and begin to chip away at the hollowness of our shared lives, organized religion may be an ideal candidate to step into the breach.

There are two widely held assumptions about the state of religion in America today. The first is that our approach to it is shallow. It is said that our myriad and diverse worshippers are well-meaning but superficial, hardly comparable to their predecessors in terms of study and devotion. The second assumption is that American religion is on the decline. While the nation remains devout, the degree of influence religion enjoys has waned. Both assumptions are true, to a point. But they don’t tell the whole story.

For one, these assumptions neglect the religious and spiritual yearning that lurks in unexpected corners. The bestselling book of recent years, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, is in one sense a screed against organized religion. Yet organized religion ought not be confused with false shibboleth, which is what the book—and the movie it spawned—purports to debunk. Indeed, the popularity of the book is only part of a broader trend, in which Americans have left churches but remain believers in the supernatural. A 2006 study by Baylor University, “American Piety in the 21st Century,” declared that it is time to look “beyond denomination” when assessing the state of religion. Fully 62.9 percent of Americans who find themselves unaffiliated with a place of worship still consider themselves

believers in “God or some higher power.” The study also showed that while members of non-Judeo-Christian religions were the most likely group to have read Brown’s book, all readers reported higher levels of belief in the “paranormal” than non-readers. The paranormal and religion aren’t synonymous, but those who subscribe to the paranormal school are nevertheless telegraphing an interest in looking beyond traditional sources for explanations to the great unknowns of the universe. The success of *The Da Vinci Code* is a signal of widespread disillusionment with the traditions and tenets of organized religion, but not belief itself.

That Americans are looking outside organized religion for answers is in part a testament to the poor state of religious leadership. Joel Osteen is a best-selling author with a television show watched by nearly 20 million people each week. He nearly sold out Yankee Stadium last April. Yet Osteen’s philosophy is pure narcissism, similar to a self-help regimen far more than engagement with questions of the divine. God wants you “to take your family to the next level,” Osteen recently told Steve Waldman of Beliefnet. God wants you to “have enough money to send your kids to college,” he continued—a worthwhile goal, certainly, but a far cry from Pascal, or even Michael Harrington. Likewise, most offensive about President Barack Obama’s selection of the Reverend Rick Warren as a speaker at his inauguration was not Warren’s homophobia—though that surely grated—but Warren’s utter vapidity as a thinker. It’s not just a problem for Christianity; the rabbinical talent of Judaism has largely dried up, as more people at the top of the class opt against the occupation of their ancestors. The great rabbis—think of those who served at the forefront of social movements in the 1950s and 60s—are a distant memory.

Instead, across religions, too many of the best and the brightest have chosen the far better paying occupations of law and finance. Those career choices are an unexamined factor in our current crisis. In *The Age of Revolution*, Eric Hobsbawm describes the way in which, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the profession of organized religion was as socially desirable as finance, consulting, and law. “To have a priest, minister or rabbi in the family was perhaps the greatest honour to which poor men could aspire, and well worth making titanic sacrifices,” he writes. Gradually, a host of other occupations opened up, even to those below the highest castes. The “social admiration” inspired by those who achieved roles of religious leadership came to be shared by “the secular intellectual, the official or teacher or, in the most marvelous cases, the lawyer and the doctor.”

Two centuries later, the trend has swung in a deleterious direction. We have too many lawyers and financiers and not enough rabbis, ministers, and priests. Conservatives make sport of arguing that our abundance of lawyers, who are inculcated in the spirit of caution essential to the legal tradition, strangles entrepreneurship and unfairly punishes business. Yet the conservative critique

misses the point. The vast number of young people who enter the law represents a missed opportunity and a problematic set of priorities. In the 1950-1951 academic year, there were 41,575 students enrolled in J.D. programs, meaning that about one in every 3,620 Americans was in law school. In 2007-2008, the most recent year for which statistics are available, that ratio is far lower: About one in every 2,125 Americans is in law school.

The fundamental social value of the law is undeniable. Yet it is naïve to think that most of those who enter law school do so in the hope of bettering the world, or even engaging with the law's ethical dilemmas. Many, if not most, are tempted by the prospect of high salaries. Those who do harbor more high-minded ambitions, meanwhile, often graduate to find themselves shackled with punishing debt and end up in the private sector anyway. In part, the increasing popularity of law school is a function of wrong-headed social values that place material gain above all else. In this way, its popularity tracks with the explosion of finance, and closely related fields, as a career path for top graduates. An astonishing 47 percent of the Harvard class of 2007 entered the world of finance and consulting. (The number has since dropped to 20 percent, although as *The Crimson* has contended, that's likely a reflection of fewer job opportunities. Harvard did not get religion in two short years.)

If some of these multitudes practicing and studying law and finance were to exchange those for more meaningful pursuits, they would be doing an invaluable favor to the quality of the life we share, suffusing it with a sense of meaning that it has lacked. Here, the interests of our national life coincide with the interests of our organized religions. Perhaps because of a lack of role models worth emulating, or perhaps because the prospect of enormous salaries elsewhere has been too tantalizing to pass up, a dwindling number of people are entering the ranks of religious leadership.

Consider Protestantism, which, despite a 14 percent drop in membership over a 30-year period, remains the country's largest religious movement. The 2004 General Social Survey revealed 50.4 percent of the country as Protestant—about 147 million Americans. Yet as of 2006, only five percent of Protestant clergy were under the age of 35. It's a self-perpetuating cycle: "Churches that have been in decline for decades are not a compelling magnet to draw energetic, passionate younger persons to commit their lives to a vocation of ministry," the Reverend Lowett Weems told PBS in 2006.

That cycle doesn't have to continue; our finest public colleges and universities could redouble their historical, once-central commitment to producing religious leaders and scholars. After all, many of them began as religious

training grounds. “Many of [our] early graduates became ministers in Puritan congregations throughout New England,” boasts Harvard’s website. At present, however, the Harvard Divinity School counts only 433 students, or a little more than two percent of the school’s entire student body. Nor is religion among the ten most popular undergraduate majors (inevitably, economics tops that list). Other top-flight institutions aren’t much different. Half of one percent of Yale students are enrolled in the Yale Divinity School; Princeton’s Theological Seminary attracts a modestly higher figure of 8 percent.

Some of this may already be changing for the better. Harvard and Yale’s Divinity Schools have reported spikes in their applicant pools for the current year of 11 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Harold Attridge, the dean of Yale Divinity School, has said that the economy “probably” has something to do with it. Another probable factor is that a large segment of the current generation of students, which has proved itself willing to do charitable and non-profit work at rates that outpace its predecessors, finds value in professions imbued with social meaning. Yet unless significantly more spots open for students who wish to pursue religion as a career, the increase in applicants won’t be as significant as it could be otherwise.

Government may therefore have a limited but important role to play. Over the past few years, proposals have sprung up on Capitol Hill that, if approved, would mandate universities with large endowments spend a certain amount of money on an annual basis. The argument goes that universities are treated by the I.R.S. as tax-exempt foundations and have crucial social roles to play. Let’s extend this argument further. Insofar as religion has an important social role to play, especially at the present moment, schools with exceptionally large endowments should be required to expend a certain proportion of those endowments on religious and ethical instruction. The role of such instruction ought not to be religious indoctrination, but engagement with the questions of value and meaning that are at the heart of the world’s great religions. Additionally, more secular scholars, such as John Rawls and Michael Sandel, whose work is, in some sense, foundationally ethical, also should be included in curricula. Non-believers, in other words, must be just as welcome as those who believe.

The point of all this is not to prepare for a new Great Awakening. Despite a drop in church attendance, the American search for God endures, and Americans still wrestle with profound questions of ethical and religious import in large numbers. Encouraging the rise of a new clergy class would not extinguish the darkness in the heart of the next Madoff any more than it would prevent the financial world from developing a successor to subprime mortgages. Yet it might diminish demand for the false dogma that they sell. ■