

Volunteers and Visionaries: The Rise and Decline of White Protestantism in the US

Westminster Presbyterian, February 2025

Dwelling in the Word

Luke 10: 1-12

Where did your attention rest?

What did you hear your partner say?

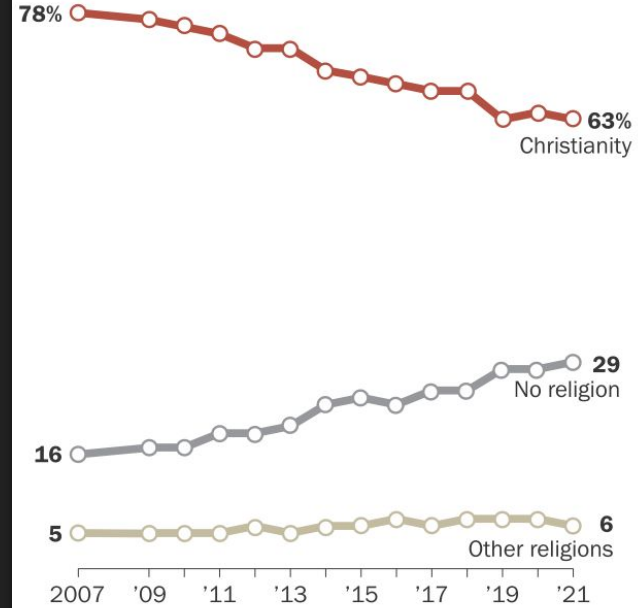


Post-Christian and/or
Post-Christendom



In U.S., roughly three-in-ten adults now religiously unaffiliated

% of U.S. adults who identify with ...

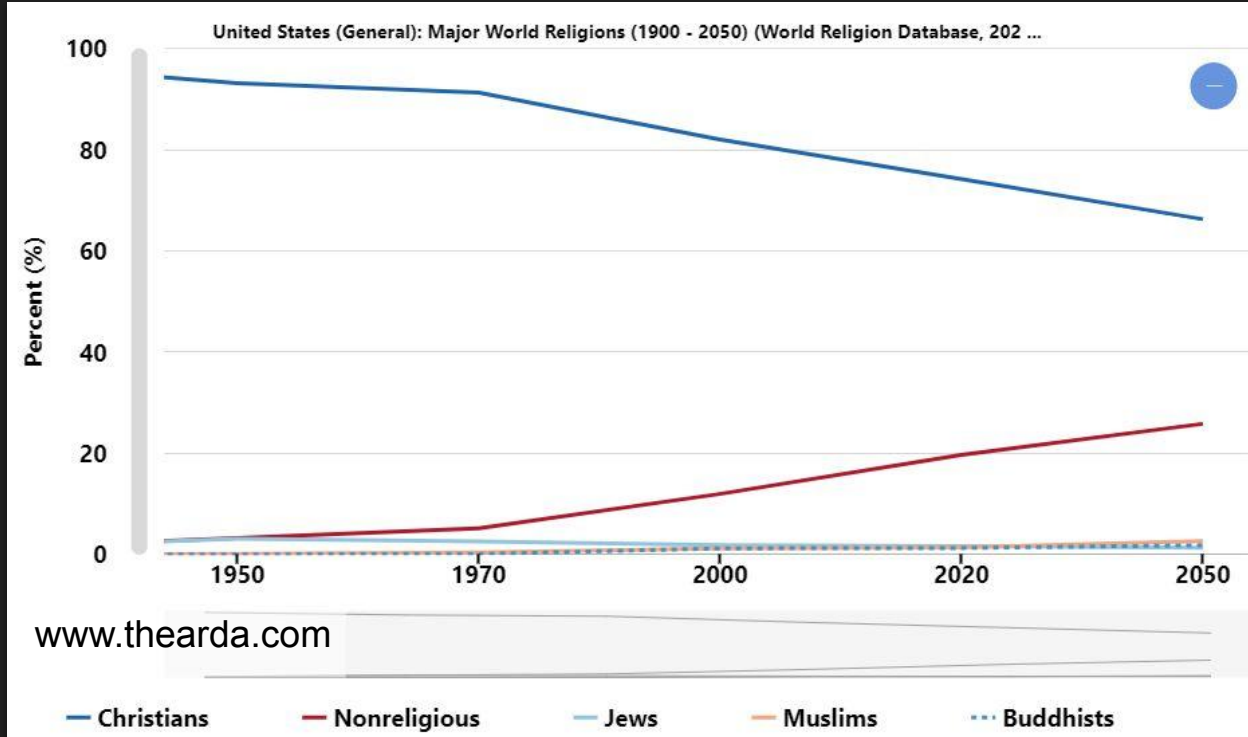


Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Data from 2020-21 based on Pew Research Center's National Public Opinion Reference Surveys (NORS), conducted online and by mail among a nationally representative group of respondents recruited using address-based sampling. All data from 2019 and earlier from the Center's random-digit-dial telephone surveys, including the 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Studies. See Methodology for details.

"About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated"

United States (General): Major World Religions (1900 - 2050) (World Religion Database, 202 ...)

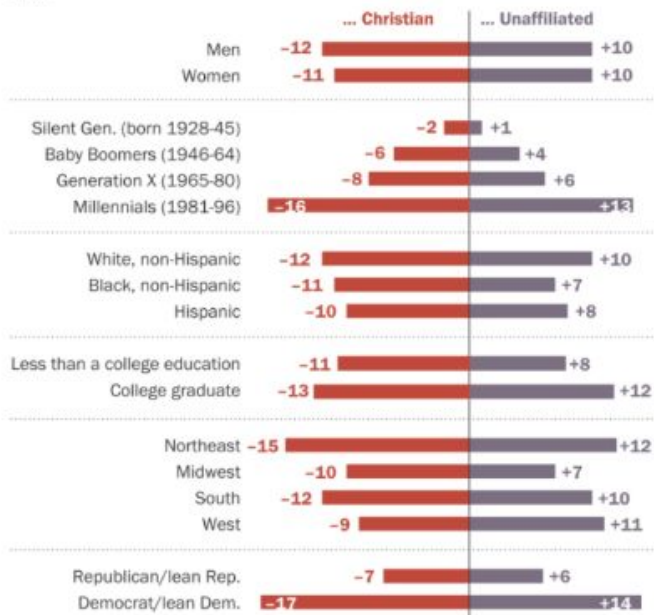


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Broad-based declines in share of Americans who say they are Christian

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Percentage-point change between 2009 and 2018/2019 in the share who identify as ...



Source: Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted 2009 and January 2018-July 2019 on the telephone.

"In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

FULL REPORT

In U.S., Decline of Christ Continues at Rapid Pace

REPORT INFOGRAPHIC

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Most white Protestants describe themselves as again or evangelical Ch

Among Protestants, sha they are 'born-again or Christians is as high as than a decade ago

Larger share of white Rep than black Republicans Christian

White Democrats are fa religious than black and Democrats

Among Democrats, one-'nones' and about six religious services infreq never

Catholic share down 9 p Northeast; Protestants of South

Women are more religio men, but both are grow religious

Most white adults now attend religious services times a year or less

Catholics no longer a m among U.S. Hispanics.

In General Social Survey, a quarter of U.S. adults the 'nones' attend relig

IN U.S., DECLINE OF CHRISTIANITY CONTINUES AT RAPID PACE

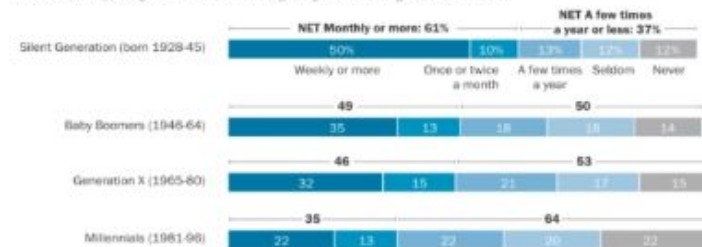
Large generation gap in American religion

Large generation gap in American religion

In 2018/2019, % of U.S. adults who identify as ...



In 2018/2019, % of U.S. adults who say they attend religious services ...



Note: Don't know/refused not shown. Source: Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted January 2018-July 2019 on the telephone. "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

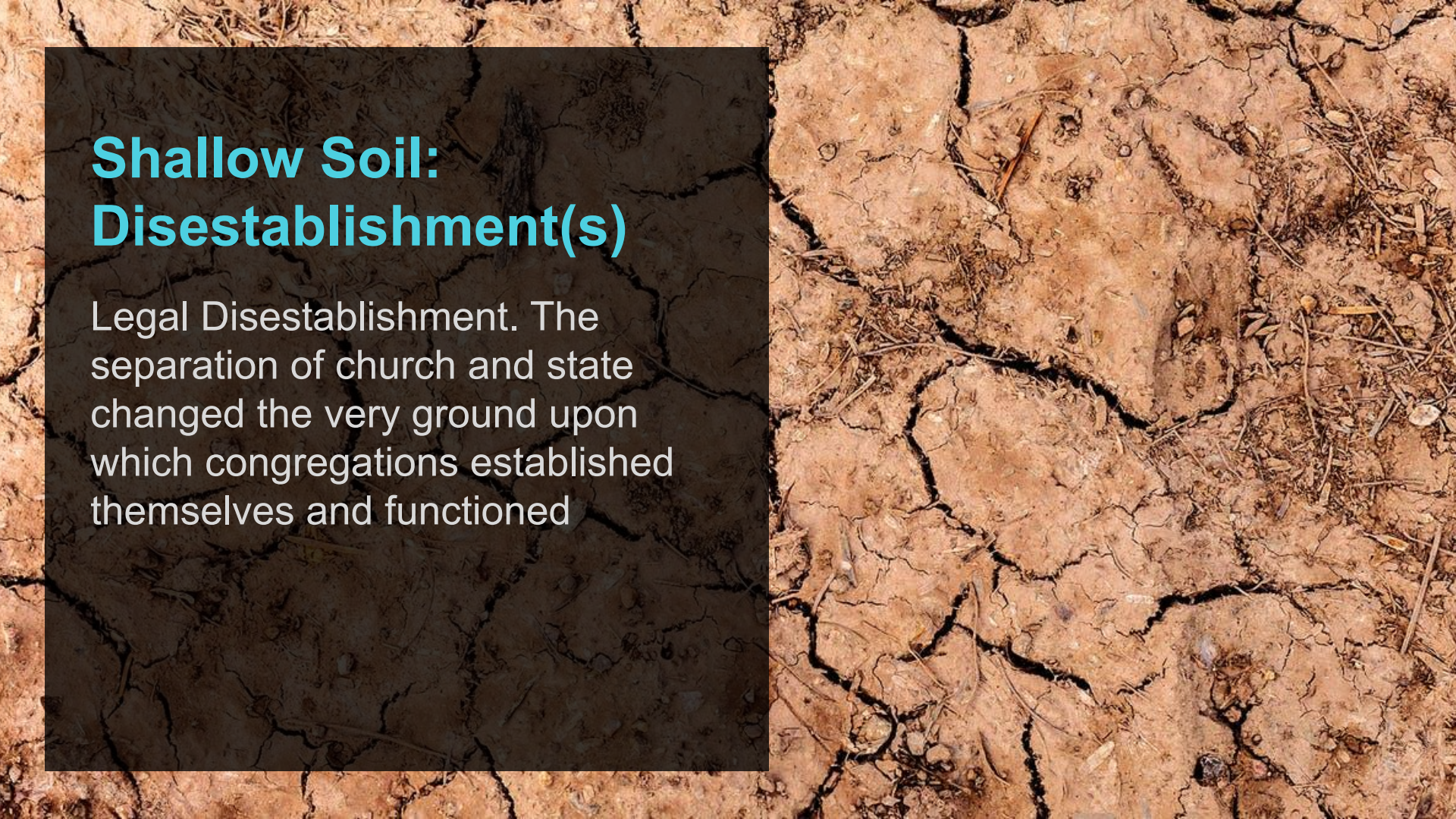
Post-Christian and/or
Post-Christendom:
Numbers, Culture, Authority

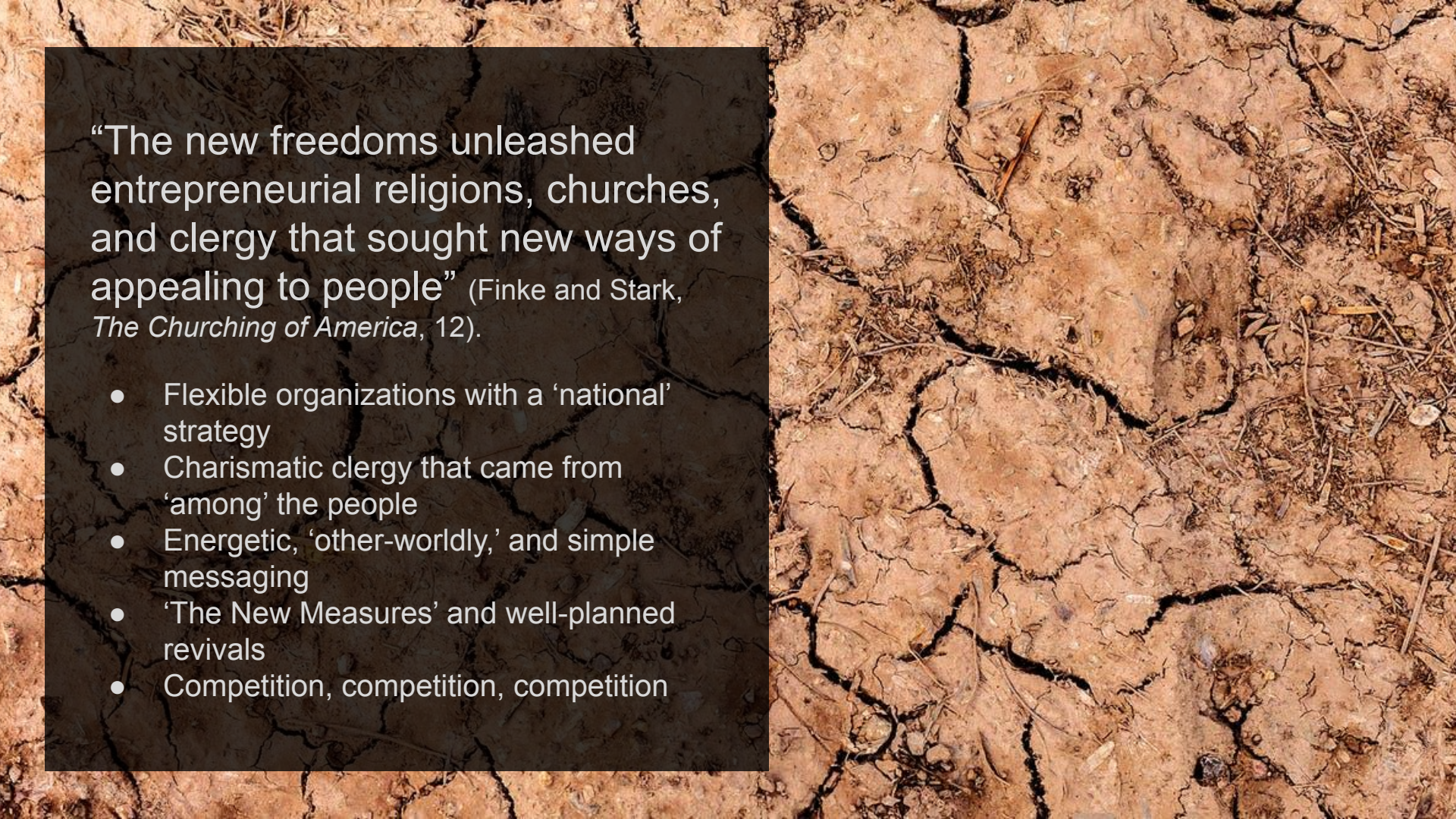


How (if at all) do you see these trends present in your own experience?

Shallow Soil: Disestablishment(s)

Legal Disestablishment. The separation of church and state changed the very ground upon which congregations established themselves and functioned





“The new freedoms unleashed entrepreneurial religions, churches, and clergy that sought new ways of appealing to people” (Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 12).

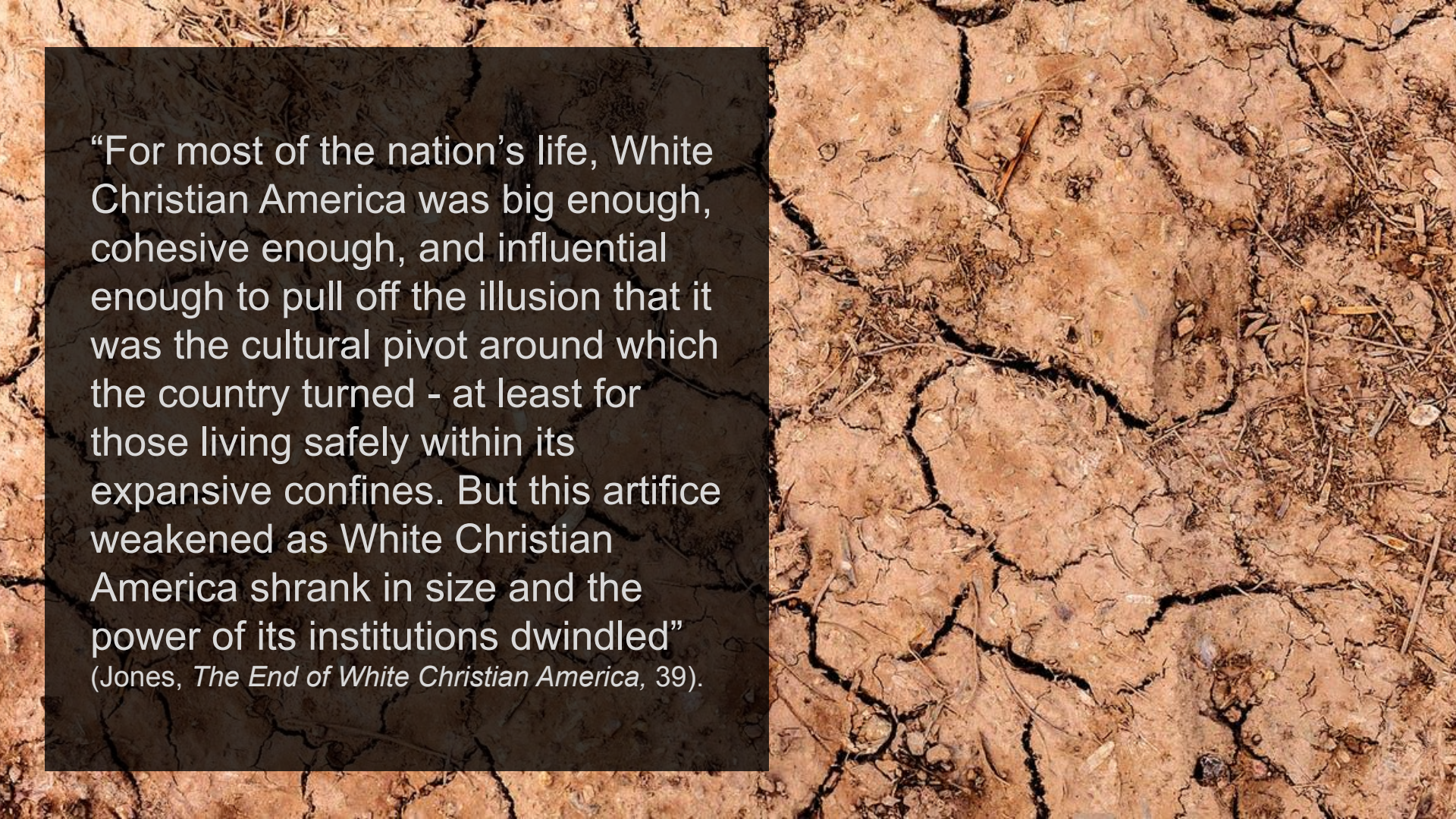
- Flexible organizations with a ‘national’ strategy
- Charismatic clergy that came from ‘among’ the people
- Energetic, ‘other-worldly,’ and simple messaging
- ‘The New Measures’ and well-planned revivals
- Competition, competition, competition

“How did the upstart sects win America? Partly by default. As free market conditions increasingly prevailed in the religious economy, the old mainline denominations failed to meet the competitive challenges and eventually abandoned the marketplace to the upstarts. Comfortable, well-paid mainline clergy rarely desired to go West and had no taste for ministering to the *ignoble vulgus*. They earned more esteem from publishing their sermons in books than from bellowing them to multitudes in open fields. In any case, clergy flirting with Unitarianism ... would have been of little worth out where the great harvest of souls was under way, even had they been willing to venture forth ... Moreover, clergy accustomed to gentlemen's agreements limiting competition ... were ill equipped to hold their own in a free market” (Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 103-104).

Shallow Soil: Disestablishment(s)

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Cultural Disestablishment. Various shifts in US society loosened the hold/authority of Mainline Protestant denominations



“For most of the nation’s life, White Christian America was big enough, cohesive enough, and influential enough to pull off the illusion that it was the cultural pivot around which the country turned - at least for those living safely within its expansive confines. But this artifice weakened as White Christian America shrank in size and the power of its institutions dwindled”
(Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 39).

Water Source: Voluntarism

Congregational structures in the US require a ready, willing, and equipped volunteer labor force. Voluntarism is/has been a fountain of life for US religious communities



US Christianity and the Voluntary Mission Society (VMS): “The principle of the voluntary society is: identify the task to be done; find appropriate means of carrying it out; unite and organize a group of like minded people for the purpose. When this principle was applied to the business of making and sustaining congregations of Christian disciples, the distinction between church and voluntary society, always fundamental in Europe, sometimes all but disappeared in America. A congregation, or a whole denomination, might in principle be no different from a voluntary society” (Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 229).

Water Source: Voluntarism

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Congregations depend upon and produce associational connections, which have undergone dramatic changes in recent decades



The Rise and Fall of Association-Building in the US: Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, tracks the decline of “social capital” in the US primarily through participation in voluntary associations

- Rates of participation have dropped off steadily after 1950, but we don't know why. What we do know:
 - Associational life *depends upon* as much as it *builds* social trust
 - It depends upon leisure time and money
 - It builds as well as depends upon social stability
 - It is *easily replaced* by low-commitment leisure activities (rates of participation decline, for example, when cities get movie theatres in the early 20th century)
- Where people *do* participate in voluntary activities in the present day, they do so *episodically*

(See Gamm and Putnam, “The Growth of Voluntary Associations 1840-1940” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29:4; Rotolo and Wilson, “What Happened to the Long Civic Generation? Explaining Cohort Differences in Voluntarism” *Social Forces* 82:3)

How (if at all) do you see these trends present in your congregation?