



# The Voluntary Sector and American Religion

There are nonprofits whose assets exceed those of several nations, such as the Ford Foundation, Harvard University, and the J. Paul Getty Trust, and there are nonprofits that conduct intense civic campaigns out of someone's kitchen with volunteer labor and never more than \$500 in the bank. There are associations dedicated to saving the world from nuclear war and associations dedicated to promoting the values of birdwatching. There are organizations such as the Democratic and Republican parties, which want to get all their candidates elected; and there is Mikes of America, which wants only to get anyone named Mike elected president of the United States. There is Mensa, an association for people with IQs of over 132; and there is Densa, "for all the rest of us." There are 350,000 churches, synagogues, and mosques for the religious; and there is Atheists Anonymous for those of a different persuasion.

Michael O'Neill. *The Third America*

## The Value of the Voluntary Sector

In one Saturday morning in October, in the auditorium of a large Lutheran church in downtown Minneapolis, the local Habitat for Humanity@affiliate celebrated both its tenth anniversary and the completion of its hundredth house. The event included a devotional service, informational seminars, program reports from affiliate staff and board members, plenty of Habitat promotional literature, videos, and T-shirts,

and, finally, a hearty lunch for scores of volunteers and new homeowners—all signs of the vitality of this international housing ministry. As the celebration came to a close, an older woman named Amanda, a retired music teacher turned volunteer house builder, stood to offer a story about a man who inadvertently fell into a deep ditch. Fortunately for him, she explained, this was a ditch next to a well-trodden road, so he was noticed by a passing government official. The official, of course, was willing to help but regretted he would have to place the man on a waiting list, as well as ask him to fill out a few legal forms and undergo extensive counseling before and after his removal from the ditch. Dissatisfied, the man in the ditch was pleased to see a businessman approach. The businessman gloated that he could easily remove the man from the ditch more quickly than the official, but made it very clear that this service would be expensive. Needless to say, the man in the ditch was enraged and began reciting a litany of curses that was silenced only by the sight of a small girl who, moved by sympathy, had dragged a ladder from her nearby home to help him. “Habitat is doing the work of that little girl,” Amanda concluded. Then she sat down.

No further explanation was given, yet it was apparent that the story was well understood by those gathered around her. Perhaps the appreciative audience responded to the Good Samaritan motif or to the politically correct depiction of a man (read: not a “welfare queen”) who receives some assistance but does the work of climbing out of the ditch himself. Whatever the case, there seemed to be a shared understanding that Habitat provides an important social space, distinct from the workings of business and government, where people’s deeply held sympathies and values can find expression through collective efforts to enhance the life of their communities. Amanda’s story and the knowing smiles and nods that it elicited from her audience seemed to indicate that the significance of this social space is recognized by the people who contribute to it during their day-to-day lives.

Social scientists, purportedly among the keenest observers and chroniclers of people’s day-to-day lives, have long acknowledged this social space, the so-called voluntary sector. In his Jacksonian-era classic, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville famously marveled at the proclivity of Americans to form associations designed to enhance the public good. “Nothing, in my view,” he claimed, “more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.” More than 160 years later, our attentiveness remains warranted. Today

voluntary associations, which are groups united to pursue an interest or promote a cause, are as heterogeneous as they are countless. They include people united on the basis of a common hobby or by a collective desire to alleviate anything from personal addiction to some perceived social malady; their organizations range from Alcoholics Anonymous to Zero Population Growth. They can also be as informal as a monthly science fiction reading group and as temporary as a political demonstration; or they may be more formal and lasting, like the nation's 1.1 million nonprofit organizations falling into any one of the twenty-six Internal Revenue Service categories for federal tax exemption.

Among their number are approximately 350,000 religious organizations, 64,000 human-service agencies, 18,000 hospitals and health-care facilities, 36,000 private schools (of which 1,873 are colleges and universities), 41,000 civic, social, and fraternal organizations, 30,000 foundations, and thousands more advocacy, cultural, and mutual-benefit organizations.<sup>2</sup> Whatever else they may represent, these numbers suggest that the United States remains, as historian Arthur Schlesinger once put it, a "nation of joiners" and that a casual bifurcation of our social ecology into "public" government and "private" business sectors is too simplistic. While it is perhaps less visible than the other two, we overlook this third, voluntary sector at our analytical peril. "They exist in a sense in the interstices of the structures of authority and materiality," wrote Waldemar Nielsen of nonprofit agencies in his influential book on the topic, "and most of their products are essentially intangible, as unmeasurable as compassion, inspiration, or dissent. . . the Third Sector has remained an invisible presence, a lund of Holy Ghost of the American Trinity."<sup>3</sup>

By distinguishing it from the "structures of authority and materiality," Nielsen suggests what many consider to be the voluntary sector's essential value to modern society. If we conceive of sectors, as sociologist Robert Wuthnow does, as defined by the "dominant principles of association" by which collectivities pursue various ends, then voluntary associations and nonprofits are commonly seen as operating according to different principles than do institutions within the other sectors.<sup>4</sup> Consider, for instance, the state. **As** most people are aware, it is composed of elected officials and accompanying administrative bureaucracies and, taken as a whole, constitutes the legitimate authority within any democratic society. Usually less reflected upon is the fact that, since it monopolizes the right to enforce compliance to its directives through

the courts, police, and the military, its operative principle is coercion. Many of the ways in which these coercive powers are exercised are obvious. They are even evident in the state's provision of the same kinds of social services also offered within the other two sectors. That welfare programs are "mandated" by the state is actually another way of saying that it employs its coercive apparatus to delimit the number of qualified beneficiaries of these programs as well as to transfer income in the form of taxes to pay for them. Furthermore, because such programs are legitimated by majoritarian will, they are governed by an instrumental logic that adheres to highly rationalized and bureaucratic procedures focusing on public accountability, efficiency, and demonstrable effectiveness.

A similar argument can be made for the market sector, which serves to allocate private goods and services within a society through exchange mechanisms. Here the governing principle is profitability, which is secured through entrepreneurship, efficiency, and complex systems of supply and demand. Since the flip side of the coin of profit is competition, businesses are inevitably steered by an instrumental concern for self-preservation. This does not mean that the sorts of services provided by the state and voluntary sectors cannot be supplied by proprietary firms. They often are, as the recent entrance of for-profit enterprise in the nursing-home "industry" demonstrates. But the market is comparable to the state in the sense that it too is governed by a rationalized logic more attuned to the imperatives of the system than to the needs of particular individuals. Rather than full persons, they are "consumers" entitled to precisely the level of care their private resources can afford (and not a bit more), or they are faceless, scrupulously catalogued "clients" benefiting (within the bounds of means-tested qualifications and now specified time limits) from the supposed largesse of the state.

In contrast, the voluntary sector, as illustrated by Amanda's story, is an arena of freely chosen activity, and its initiatives are relatively free of bureaucratic and pecuniary constraints. To say its dominant principle is voluntarism means that people are free to enter into (and exit from) participation with those voluntary associations that best reflect their own values. This is clearly not the case for the other sectors, which are actually *involuntary* in the sense that no one living in a given territory is exempt from its statutory laws, and not even the most monastic among us can totally avoid buying and selling on the capitalist market.

Voluntarism also implies that the freely chosen, expressive values upon which voluntary associations are typically founded actually drive their everyday activities. There is a certain nonrationalized quality to voluntarism. Even when people behave instrumentally and try to get things done in the voluntary sector, the means by which they do so are much less settled upon than in the other sectors. These means typically entail considerable in-depth reflection among volunteers and staff upon the people whose needs they are attempting to meet. Those people are also more likely to be treated not only as full persons but as persons with actual voices capable of directing the specific voluntary association or nonprofit in question.

This, in the eyes of innumerable dedicated participants and scholarly observers, is the real value of the voluntary sector. By institutionalizing expressive values and operating according to a noninstrumentalized organizational logic, voluntary associations generate a sense of moral obligation to others that far surpasses perceiving and treating them as mere clients or consumers. As Alan Wolfe explained in *whose Keeper*, his important book on civil society, “moral obligation ought to be viewed as a socially constructed practice, something we learn through the actual experience of trying to live together with other people.” If this is the case, then voluntary associations, at their best, can contribute to an expanded notion of obligation to others by carving out a social niche for such practices as open discussion, shared responsibility, community leadership, and even personal sacrifice. Voluntary-sector organizations do this by keeping expressive values like compassion and justice from being simply vague, ethereal notions. The values that instill a concern for human rights, fire safety, or adequate housing, for instance, will not get a full hearing in society unless they are institutionalized in groups that range from Amnesty International to the local volunteer fire department to Habitat. Such values might no longer be part of our social ecology, and no longer stimulate the imaginations and incite the energies of even the most socially concerned, if they are not institutionalized within the voluntary sector.

“We form institutions,” wrote Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *The Good Society*, “and they form us every time we engage in a conversation that matters.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, voluntary associations not only provide individuals with numerous and manageable volunteer roles to enact their deepest values; they are also institutional bearers of evocative narratives and language (biblical, civic, humanistic, and so forth) through which those

values come to make sense and actually obligate people to behave in accordance with them. In ways that are rare in other areas of our busy lives, they present opportunities, even expectations, for us to engage publicly in the conversations that matter most to us. Voluntary associations are, in the words of Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, “the value-generating and value-maintaining agencies in society” because they contribute to forming us and allowing us to reach beyond the narrow confines of our own private interests.’ In sum, they facilitate the construction of a fuller sense of moral obligation to others by providing the practices through which busy people can live out their highest values and by creating the cultural templates and conversations that enable them to discern authentic meaning in those practices.

## The Scope of the Voluntary Sector

While certainly instructive, Amanda’s story may lull one into conceiving the voluntary sector as less expansive and organized than it actually is. The personal, homespun nature of her story gives no hint that, as reported in a 1981 study, the cash outlays from nonprofits in the United States astonishingly exceeded the gross domestic products (GDP) of all but seven nations in the world.<sup>8</sup> Four decades ago no more than seven thousand new nonprofits applied to the IRS for tax-exempt status each year and, all told, they accounted for about 2.1 percent of the U.S. national GDP. Now organizations are becoming tax-exempt by the tens of thousands annually and they constitute more than 6 percent of the American economy. Voluntary-sector growth is outpacing that of both the state and market sectors, which make up 14 and 80 percent of the GDP respectively.’

Even though about one out of every fifteen American workers is currently employed by a nonprofit organization, the amount of *unpaid* labor within the voluntary sector is one of its most remarkable assets.<sup>10</sup> The research institute Independent Sector found that in 1993 nearly half of all Americans eighteen years or older had volunteered within the previous year and more than one in four volunteered five or more hours per week.’ With a combined average of 4.2 hours per week, these 89 million adult volunteers contributed approximately 19.5 billion hours of work in a single year. Nearly a quarter of these hours went to such informal activities as helping a neighbor, babysitting, or baking coolies for a school fundraising drive. The remaining three-quarters

involved formal volunteering at nonprofit organizations, and it represented the equivalent of 8.8 million full-time workers whose estimated value, if paid, would have reached \$182 billion.

Support to the voluntary sector is not restricted to contributions of time. Charitable donations are a huge part of its success as well. For the nearly three-quarters of American households that gave money to various causes in 1993, the average total amount for the year was \$880 or 2.1 percent of household income. Forty-four percent of these contributing households gave at least 1 percent of their annual income, and a full 12 percent gave 5 percent or more. As one would expect, contribution rates depend on such variables as gross income, marital status, and educational attainment. One of the more striking findings, however, is that these rates are also affected by the level of volunteering in the household. The nearly one-third of all American households that made charitable contributions, but did not volunteer, donated an average of 1.1 percent of their annual income. This figure more than doubles (2.6 percent of annual income) for those households that both gave money and volunteered. The actual number of volunteer hours is also a decisive factor. Households that volunteered less than one hour per week gave an average of 2.4 percent of their annual incomes, while those that volunteered at least five hours per week contributed 3.9 percent. In addition to cautioning us against sounding a cynical death-knell for generosity in the United States, these data suggest that the practices of volunteering and charitable giving tend to be mutually reinforcing.’?

The support the voluntary sector receives from ordinary working people becomes most evident if one considers that individual households are responsible for nearly nine-tenths of all private giving in the United States. Currently foundations account for only 6 percent of all private funding for nonprofits, while businesses — despite the oft-publicized magnanimity of corporate philanthropists — contribute a scant 5 percent.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that, although a sturdy pillar of the voluntary-sector edifice, all private giving combined generates only about one-quarter of the total nonprofit revenues in the United States. The other two pillars are actually the state and market sectors. Due largely to what has been dubbed the “new federalist” approach to social welfare, whereby government (at all levels) contracts with nonprofits to deliver programs to its citizens, the state has in recent years become the source of another quarter of all nonprofit revenues.

Meanwhile, a full 45 percent is derived from nonprofits' activity within the market.<sup>14</sup> Whether their revenues come from membership fees, payment-for-service contracts, or such commercial activities as investments and subsidiary enterprises, it appears that few nonprofits can afford to be inattentive to the bottom line.

Nonprofit organizations function within a complicated social ecology that seldom exempts them from the cost-benefit considerations that preoccupy business firms nor entirely deprives them of the public funds that support state-mandated programs and entities. While altruism and voluntarism are undeniable elements of the social world, it is important to remember that they do not exist in a world of unfettered, spontaneous do-goodism, isolated from the state and market. When nonprofit organizations are given government funds to deliver various services to the public and, in the process, get weighed down by the same sorts of red tape, accountability requirements, and bureaucratic structure that are the scorned features of state agencies, then one realizes that the voluntary sector is not immune from familiar organizational patterns and pathologies. And should anyone doubt that the voluntary sector is at the mercy of the same economic uncertainties as businesses are, then the decreases in individual (and especially corporate) giving and volunteering that accompany recessions should suffice to make them think otherwise. Certainly businesses do not fail to notice the commercial nature—and, at times, substantial market shares—of many nonprofit organizations. **As** the increasing number of unfair competition lawsuits filed by the Small Business Association against nonprofits attests, business firms are quick to see in such organizations kindred spirits doing what they can to remain fiscally viable.”

The voluntary sector, while characterized by people's commitments of time and money to associations promoting their freely chosen values, is not entirely free of the systemic imperatives so prominent in the state and market sectors. This realization complicates the picture somewhat. It would be easier to think of these sectors as the institutional equivalents of a Scylla and Charybdis, between which reputable nonprofits like Habitat are always able to navigate successfully. But this is not the case, and a failure to understand this comes at the cost of being blind to important organizational dynamics occurring within most nonprofits. In the specific case of Habitat, seeing such dynamics more clearly also requires one to recognize the prominent role played by religion within the voluntary sector.



## The Voluntary Sector and the Religious Factor

**The importance we thus attribute to the sociology of religion does not in the least imply that religion must play the same role in present-day societies that it has played at other times. In a sense, the contrary conclusion would be more sound. Precisely because religion is a primordial phenomenon, it must yield more and more to the new social forms which it has engendered.**

Emile Durkheim, *Année sociologique*

### Introducing the Lay of the Land

If the voluntary sector can be likened to a plot of fallow soil from which institutions bearing expressive values may burgeon forth, then only the dullest of observers could fail to observe that the fruits of religious sentiments and concerns have been perennially its highest yield. Indeed, planted within the most sizable section of this plot are the 350,000 churches, synagogues, and mosques to which 40 percent of all American adults flock during any given week.<sup>16</sup> But these institutions, as important as they are, are hardly the only outgrowths of religious values in the United States today. Recent studies, for example, indicate that 86 percent of all students receiving private elementary or secondary education are enrolled in religiously based schools, while more than three-quarters of the accredited private colleges and universities have a religious affiliation. Similar observations can be made about other parts of the voluntary sector as well. At least one-third of all child-care agencies, for instance, are church based. Many health-care organizations, particularly hospitals, have been founded by religious groups. Most of the largest international aid and relief organizations have religious affiliations.” Finally, in the absence of their founding religious visions such prominent social service organizations as the YMCA, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, the Salvation Army, and the United Way would likely never exist.

Despite evidence of the religious bounty within it, scholarship on the voluntary sector has persisted in portraying it as something of a secular wasteland. Consider, for instance, Daphne Layton’s 1987 annotated bibliography of 2,195 books and articles on voluntarism and philanthropy, which, although admirably comprehensive, listed only fifty-seven publications (a mere 2.1 percent of the total) that specifically dealt with religion.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, a significant component of the voluntary sector is not being observed. But, one hastens to caution, this does not

necessarily mean that the published researchers in this field ought to be written off as dull observers. It is more likely that their analytical faculties have been meticulously sharpened by Enlightenment categories that equate religious traditions with superstition, prerational need fulfillment, and authoritarianism — all of which are deemed incompatible with public discourse and shared conceptions of the common good. As religiosity enters the pluralistic realm of the voluntary sector, the **typical** assumption proceeds, it must divest itself of its particular beliefs and practices and behave as instrumentally as all the other institutions that are simply trying to accomplish their goals. This assumption, incidentally, is not without empirical support. The YMCA, after all, has long dropped its “C” in favor of preaching the Good News of Nautilus equipment and Jazzercise, and the members of the Salvation Army still proudly wear their militaristic uniforms but, at times, seem to have removed the threads of salvation that once bound their organization together so tightly.

While notable, this process is neither universal nor inexorable. Researchers who have given short shrift to the salience of religion within the voluntary sector tend to neglect three critical points. First, the very existence of the sector is a result of religiously inspired dissent occurring at the outset of the modern era. Second, people’s religious convictions have invigorated the voluntarism, charitable giving, interpersonal networks, and basic, everyday compassion that are the lifeblood of the voluntary sector as a whole. Finally, these observers overlook the fact that, even though many religious nonprofits have been secularized, scores of new ones are sprouting up within the voluntary sector, seemingly at every moment. One important innovation is what this study will call *paradenominational* organizations, of which Habitat is a provocative example. These are essentially religiously based organizations founded to mobilize their constituencies in pursuing a decidedly public agenda or in promoting some kind of social change. In addition to institutionalizing expressive values in public, these groups—to the extent that involvement in them functions as authentic expressions of individuals’ faith commitments—also represent, as Durkheim stated it in the epigraph above, one of the irrepressible new social forms that religious sensibilities may assume. The remainder of this chapter will address in order each of these three analytical lacunae regarding religion in the voluntary sector.

## Tilling the Soil: The Consequences of Religious Dissent

As land needs to be tilled in preparation for new growth, so too has the voluntary sector been readied by people who, in a sense, have turned the ground from which the seeds of voluntary associations have sprouted and grown to maturity. Within Western societies, in other words, religion typically provided the initial motivation for forming, and the legitimation for maintaining, groups of believers united in accordance with principles of association distinct from those of the “principalities and powers” of the world. The religious principle that has contributed most to the burgeoning of the voluntary sector is the biblical notion of the covenant.’ ‘)Central to both Christianity and Judaism, it depicts a God actively engaged in the struggles of history and insistent that people abide by ethical norms that supersede civil law. The covenant envisions a God concerned with human affairs, just as it presumes associations of the faithful called to privilege the “higher law” of divine mandate over temporal authority.’ ‘) One of the founding figures in sociology, Max Weber, emphasized this theme in his groundbreaking study *Ancient Judaism*. In it, he described the Jewish prophets as early exemplars of religious leaders able to create the sort of social space from which kings’ prerogatives could be criticized on the basis of alternative, frequently dissident, interpretations of God’s will.<sup>21</sup> Similar observations have been made regarding the early Christian church. Commenting upon Jesus’ admonition to render to God what is God’s, Alfred North Whitehead got to the crux of the issue by noting incisively that “however limited may be the original intention of the saying, very quickly God was conceived as a principle of organization in complete disjunction from Caesar.””

Without question, the single most important development in curbing what would hence be rendered unto Caesar was the Radical Reformation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, which spawned sectarian movements seeking to surpass the reforms achieved by Lutheranism and Calvinism. In addition to advocating intense moral purity and promoting a millennial expectation that served to relativize state authority, these more radical groups also disagreed with the ecclesiology embedded in those two main branches of Protestantism. Groups like the Baptists, Quakers, and Presbyterian Independents, to name the most influential, regarded their congregations as “free” or “gathered”

churches constituted by authentic believers who had experienced spiritual regeneration. They were not state-established churches into which the masses were simply born. To the sects, Protestant ecclesiology generally smacked too much of a sinful Constantinianism, which elided church and state and did not sufficiently emphasize a freely chosen and rigorous understanding of church membership. They, on the other hand, were essentially voluntary associations made up of religious virtuosi who were expected to take very seriously their identities as members of covenanted communities. Indeed, the prolonged religious persecution and warfare that marked much of early modern European history is indicative of the seriousness with which these groups clung to their convictions.

Over time, the right to religious dissent came to be widely accepted. The Free Churches became tolerated and gained a level of autonomy from state control that, as other religious and secular groups followed suit, ultimately led to the emergence of the voluntary sector as a distinct component of the social ecology.

The Radical Reformation's impact in establishing a pluralistic voluntary sector does not end there. Stating the case baldly, James Luther Adams, who has done some of the most influential work on this topic, argues that "Nonconformity in modern religious history has made a decisive contribution to the achievement of freedom of association and the development of modern democracy."<sup>23</sup> This, he contends, is because the Free Churches engendered certain practices and ideas through which they functioned as a kind of seedbed of democracy. Four features of these churches were particularly influential. First, the congregational form of polity by which these churches governed themselves meant that each local church was entirely autonomous and sustained by the active participation and decision-making of its members. Second, they incorporated a separation of powers into their internal structures. The laity, commensurate with the idea of the "priesthood of all believers," not only ordained their own clergy but also reserved for themselves the power to make important decisions at congregational meetings. Third, their contention that collective decisions were made through the counsel of the Holy Spirit meant that significant attention was typically devoted to achieving consensus. Even when this was not possible, this pneumatic emphasis meant that minority views were at least listened to and taken seriously since they had the potential of being divinely inspired.<sup>24</sup> Finally, as these ideas and practices instilled the habits of self-governance,

these churches often formed new voluntary associations extending beyond themselves. Originally these were formed *to* disseminate their ideas among members of the established churches in a manner similar to the modern interest group or political action committee, but soon this movement came to include associations for social reform as well.’ The Free Churches, in sum, did not simply advance the cause of freedom of *religious* association. They also precipitated the demand for freedom of association in general, which in turn allowed the cultivation of democracy to proceed in earnest.

### Fertilizing the Soil: Religion and Social Capital

Theorists have long stressed the importance of a healthy voluntary sector for sustaining democracy, and Alexis de Tocqueville’s reflections on this question are still among the most memorable. Commenting upon an associative urge he considered unique to the United States, he writes:

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations . . . Americans combine to give fetes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. Hospitals, prisons, and schools take shape in that way. Finally, if they want *to* proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association. In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association.’”

While this may sound politically salubrious, Tocqueville was cautiously aware that the same “condition of equality” among American citizens that precipitated their democracy could also manifest itself as a pervasive individualism potentially threatening to the continued viability of the republic. By retreating into their own private avocations and material pursuits, individuals without a sense of public responsibility, he feared, would leave the governing of social affairs to a centralized state, which would mark the *de facto* demise of democracy.

The most important safeguard against this threat of administrative despotism was, for Tocqueville, the mores (*moeurs*)—or “habits of the heart”—of the people. These include the ideas, dispositions, and habitual practices (such as volunteering and charitable giving) necessary for producing virtuous citizens and thus a strong tradition of participatory democracy. He considered religion fundamental for pushing those mores in the direction of public responsibility. “Religion is considered

the guardian of mores,” he writes, “and mores are regarded as the guarantee of the laws and pledge for the maintenance of freedom itself.”<sup>27</sup> Put differently, religion tempers individualism by inculcating the notion that recognizing and fulfilling obligations to others is actually in one’s own long-term self-interest. This is not moral heroism to Tocqueville but simply “self-interest properly understood.” “Every religion,” he elaborates, “also imposes on each man some obligations toward mankind, to be performed in common with the rest of mankind, and so draws him away, from time to time, from thinking about himself.”<sup>28</sup> Given religion’s capacity to deepen people’s sense of public obligation and stimulate civic participation, it is little wonder he considered Americans’ religiosity to be “the first of their *political* institutions.” The health of the voluntary sector and the vigor of both the religious and secular institutions within it, he suggests, are compromised without a citizenry tutored by religious sensibilities.

The validity of Tocqueville’s argument for the present day rests upon the fact that religious institutions provide what, in a widely influential article, political scientist Robert Putnam calls “social capital.”<sup>29</sup> Defined as the “networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit,” social capital provides people with the resources that encourage and enable them to become more politically engaged citizens. Religious and other voluntary groups, he maintains, put people into contact with one another such that they are recruited into further civic activity, gain information about public issues and events, acquire a sense of generalized reciprocity and group loyalty, and develop feelings of personal efficacy by which their own efforts toward enhancing the common good are deemed worthwhile. Social capital, then, protects democracy because it empowers citizens. Because religious groups build social capital they, at least potentially, perform Tocqueville’s role of enhancing democratic participation. Or, to use the aforementioned agrarian analogy, religion — along with performing the historical labor of tilling the soil — serves as a kind of fertilizer that stimulates the outcroppings of civic virtue and participation without which our communities would become ominously barren.

The evidence for this is truly compelling. One-third of Americans’ volunteer labor and a remarkable two-thirds of all charitable giving by individuals are directed to religious organizations.<sup>30</sup> About half of this time and money is devoted to specifically religious activities such as liturgical ministry or catechetical education; the rest spills out into local

communities in numerous ways.” For instance, 90 percent of congregations in the United States sponsor at least one social-service program.<sup>32</sup> Church members exceed nonmembers in volunteering and giving—not only to religious but to secular nonprofits as well. Among Americans currently active in social movements, a stunning two-thirds of them describe their motivations as being primarily religious.” One notable study actually discovered religious involvement to be the single best predictor of people’s sense of attachment to their own communities.<sup>34</sup> Comparing the self-described most religious with the least religious, this survey revealed the former to be seven times more likely to attend a community meeting and about 50 percent more likely to vote in local elections, to discuss political issues with friends, and even to pay their own neighbors an occasional visit.

Evidence abounds to support Tocqueville’s contention that religion contributes to the fecundity of the voluntary sector and molds people into more socially engaged citizens. Who could deny—and who does not have an ample supply of anecdotal evidence—that religion accounts for those “habits of the heart” encouraging people to gather together, forgive trespasses against them, walk the extra mile, turn the other cheek, discuss pressing social issues (usually over bland coffee) in the basements of churches throughout the land, and accept that we are indeed one another’s keepers? Who, furthermore, could deny that these expressive values are truly religiously informed ones? What many are unsure about is precisely how religious organizations generate social capital among the citizens affiliated with them.

There are no magical formulas. One of the very basic things that churches (and synagogues and mosques) do is provide congregants with transferable skills enabling them to participate more fully and confidently in civic activities elsewhere. That churches can function as a kind of training ground for civic skills has been demonstrated by one national survey. It discovered that 12 percent of all adult members had written a letter and 18 percent had made a public presentation on behalf of their church, 32 percent had attended a church meeting where decisions were made, and 17 percent had actually planned such a meeting.’;

Of course, such skills would remain underutilized if people did not actually *want* to employ them. Creating this desire is another forte of churches. No one has been more attentive to this than Robert Bellah and his co-authors, who, concerned that we are increasingly shaped by the “first language of American individualism,” regret that typically in

the United States “we put our own good, as individuals, as groups, as a nation ahead of the common good.”<sup>36</sup> From the churches, though, shine glimmers of hope. Sustained within these “communities of memory” Bellah and his colleagues detect the “second languages” of the biblical and republican cultural traditions that may yet color our imaginations and direct our interests beyond ourselves. Political scientist James Reichley agrees. “From the standpoint of the public good,” he maintains, “the most important service churches offer to secular life in a free society is to nurture moral values that help to humanize capitalism and give direction to democracy.”<sup>37</sup> Churches can do this because they bring together groups of people who share expectations of altruistic behavior. They also coalesce stories that—depicting everything from fiery prophets denouncing social injustice to widows selflessly parting with their last mites to head-shaven bodhisattvas modeling the essence of compassion—function as cultural templates making such behavior both imaginable and desirable.

Making people aware of various social issues is a way churches parlay the desire to do something into actual doing. Pastors’ sermons, congregational publications, and informal interactions are all means by which people gain information about community needs from their churches. For example, a National Election Studies survey measured the frequency with which church members reported that their pastors “speak out” on selected social issues. Three-fifths said their pastors addressed the problem of low-income housing, nearly two-fifths indicated their pastors spoke about disparate economic issues, and one-fifth said their pastors voiced their opinions on the topic of nuclear disarmament.<sup>38</sup> And the people in the pews seem to be listening. Consider a study of church members in Indiana.<sup>39</sup> Among those who indicated that their churches encouraged them to help others, a full nine-tenths said the churches did so by providing them with information about community needs.

Another way churches transform people’s desire to help into actual helping is by serving as loci for recruitment into various forms of civic participation. For their nationwide survey on voluntarism, political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady queried people about whether and where they had been asked to vote for a particular political candidate or to take some other political action (such as signing a petition, writing a letter, or contacting a public official) regarding a pressing issue. Fully one-third of Americans had been asked to do



one or both of these things at their churches, whereas less than one-fifth were asked at their jobs and fewer than one in ten were asked at the other (nonpolitical) voluntary associations with which they were affiliated.<sup>40</sup> The impact of such appeals should not be underestimated since people who are asked to donate their time to various causes are actually about four times more likely to do so than those who are not asked at all.<sup>41</sup>

Churches, therefore, generate social capital by making their members more skilled, willing, and informed and by recruiting them into active roles within the voluntary sector. One final and critically important point is that churches also perform these functions more democratically than any other major institution in the United States today. Evidence for this too has been compiled by Verba and his colleagues. The title of their book, *Voice and Equality*, reminds us that—even though American politics operates according to strict one-person, one-vote equality—the degree to which different groups can voice their concerns to government varies by social class. Better-off citizens, for instance, can write checks to make sure their political opinions are heard. They are also disproportionately represented within civic organizations and within occupations that provide the requisite skills and opportunities for political engagement. In stark contrast, however, this research found that it is primarily the churches that do this for nonelite and thus politically underrepresented groups of people. In a nation with relatively weak labor unions and virtually no class-based political parties, their data reveal religion to be not the “opium of the people,” as Karl Marx once disdainfully characterized it, but a kind of political amphetamine helping to mobilize less advantaged people within the voluntary sector.

### New Harvest: **A** Bumper Crop of Paradenominational Organizations

In addition to creating the voluntary sector and enriching it with social capital, the influence of religion is apparent in the new institutions that continue to emerge there. This development tends to be overlooked by observers who focus on more familiar organizational harvests. Robert Putnam, for example, has correctly perceived religious institutions as generative of social capital. Yet he depicts them as sharing the declines in activism evident in politics, labor unions, parent-teacher associations, civic and fraternal organizations, and—despite the greater numbers of people bowling than ever before—even organized bowling leagues.

His is a warning that should not be taken lightly. Our essential interdependence with others and thus our responsibility to be informed about issues affecting the common good surely unfolds in the company of our fellows or not at all. Cultivating a dense civic culture is important if we are to avoid living in an “all against all” social milieu where self-interests trump our altruistic impulses. But there is reason to pause. The fact that fewer people are joining bowling leagues does not necessarily mean that they, as Putnam fears, are “bowling alone.” Perhaps they are bowling with people from their workplaces or neighborhoods, or perhaps—exerting commendable efforts to solidify the purportedly disintegrating family—they are using bowling alleys as places to reconnect with loved ones. Or it may even be that bowling leagues have become too rigid or competitive and, therefore, bowlers who leave them actually demonstrate a greater, more authentic commitment to the game.

Similar caveats can be made about religious institutions. Putnam ruefully informs his readers that “net participation by Americans, both in religious services and in church-related groups, has declined modestly (by perhaps a sixth) since the 1960s.”<sup>42</sup> Yet he does not notice the emergence of new social forms of religion that may not be so church-centered. People, he seems to imply, must be doing everything from praying alone to (if it is possible) apostatizing alone. Little heed is paid to the possibility that they might be living out their religious values in different contexts, in different company—but not alone—and perhaps, as was suggested with the case of bowling, demonstrating a greater, more authentic commitment to those values all the while.

Paradenominational organizations are an important example of a social form of religion to which Putnam and other theorists have given little consideration. These are religiously inspired, though usually ecumenical, voluntary associations with explicitly public missions. They include organizations that stir social activism such as Bread for the World, a lobbying group on hunger issues, and Pax Christi, an advocacy group for peace and disarmament. They include organizations like the Saint Vincent DePaul Society and Habitat for Humanity®, which attend to people’s basic needs. Within the community of the religious right, they promote everything from moral family-policy legislation (Focus on the Family) to the charismatic gifts of glossolalia and faith healing (the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship). They represent the concerns of various occupational groups through the National

Association of Church Business Administrators, the Christian Legal Society, the Christian Chiropractors Association, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. They advocate for the social rights of such disparate groups as women (Task Force on Equality of Women in Judaism), gays and lesbians (Dignity, Affirmation), the elderly (Catholic Golden Age), African Americans (American Baptist Black Caucus), and numerous others. The list could go on indefinitely. The key point is that these paradenominational groups are manifestations of an increasingly significant social form of religion in the United States today. It is also a form that appears to be just as much a product of people's authentic, religiously informed commitments as it is a vehicle by which those commitments are invigorated and institutionalized within the larger society.

The scholar perhaps most attentive to this social form of religion has been sociologist Robert Wuthnow.<sup>43</sup> He notes that while religious voluntary associations like the prayer-meeting movement and abolitionist movement emerged during the early nineteenth century, they were never structured into formal organizations. The forerunners of paradenominational groups were thus the foreign and domestic mission societies also formed during that time. Organizations like the American Bible Society (1816), the American Tract Society (1823), the American Sunday School Union (1824), the American Education Society (1826), and the American Temperance Union (1836) qualify as the first paradenominational groups insofar as they focused on narrowly defined objectives, tended to transcend denominational barriers in attracting supporters, and had some centralized coordination of local chapters, which were often dispersed nationally.

Fully enumerating these groups today, Wuthnow concedes, would be an unmanageable undertaking since they are so varied and pursue their goals in such a vast array of institutional settings. Looking only at the most prominent, he discovered 800 paradenominational groups with IRS tax-exempt status as religious nonprofits and ministries of national scope. This is certainly an impressive number. It looms even larger in light of the fact that no more than several dozen such groups existed at the close of the Civil War, less than 150 had been formed by the turn of the century, and only half of the present number were in operation immediately following World War II. The public's participation in these groups is also significant, although this too is difficult to quantify since these organizations seldom keep records of their constituencies. But there is national survey data on the public's involvement in ten different

categories of social ministries, into which most paradenominational groups are likely to fall.<sup>44</sup> Making use of this data, Wuthnow found that most American adults have heard of these ministries and a surprising one-third of them had participated in an organization belonging in one of the ten categories. To put things into perspective, this is a larger proportion of the population than that which attends religious services on a regular weekly basis. Consider also that the impressive 7 percent of Americans who report involvement in world hunger ministries, for example, is comparable to the 7 percent who are members of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination.<sup>45</sup>

There are discernible reasons for the proliferation of these groups. First, the increased professionalization of religious workers means they are now increasingly inclined to form organizations attending to their own concerns (recall the National Association of Church Business Administrators) as well as to the needs of the people they are trained to serve. The growing tendency for religious people to form organizations imitating or challenging other groups is another factor. To give an illustration, groups like Catholic Women for the ERA imitate some of the work of the secular National Organization for Women (NOW), but their efforts are countered by other paradenominational groups, such as the largely evangelical American Coalition for Traditional Values. None of these groups could approach their actual levels of influence if it were not for a third factor: technological innovation. Computers, direct-mail capabilities, and the mass media have permitted organizations to spread their messages more widely. That average citizens are now capable of responding more effectively to these messages due to higher levels of educational attainment and increased affluence is a fourth factor. Next, and very importantly, the postwar expansion of the state's role in such areas as education, social welfare, and equal-rights legislation has meant, first, that religious constituencies wanting to have a significant say in policy decisions have had to form paradenominational groups to do so. Second, given the previously mentioned "new federalist" structure of social welfare, paradenominational groups have also emerged as prominent delivery conduits for government-funded services and entitlement programs.<sup>46</sup>

There is one final, specifically religious reason to consider. These groups have become more popular because they are a means by which people "put legs to" their religious commitments and infuse the secular

public sphere with a language and sensibility attuned to the sacred. In a manner that differs from congregations and denominational structures, paradenominational groups have become important institutional vehicles by which the sacred is publicly represented for people through their own everyday actions within the voluntary sector.<sup>47</sup>

Representing the sacred is no trivial matter. Indeed, even defining it is problematic since it refers to those things that are considered most holy, numinous, and set apart. According to sociologist Emile Durkheim, religion itself is based upon the distinction people inevitably make between things that, by virtue of being embedded in the routines of everyday life, are profane and those that are imbued with the extraordinary character of the sacred. When perceived by individuals, the sacred confers a sense of the transcendent, of something beyond the self that seems to put ordinary life into an all-encompassing context and provide it with greater meaning.

Whether this sense of sacredness is linked to a supernatural being is a theological question that for many remains shrouded in mystery. Still, the sense of the sacred that intermittently insinuates itself into people's everyday realities and consciousnesses needs to be adequately represented in order to be a feature of the social world. Without places to reside, the sacred has no home in a given society and is ultimately evicted from people's minds, which are left to ponder the clatter of busy quasi-certitudes, routinized tasks, and perhaps a future appointment or two. Institutions provide the residential structures for the sacred, and paradenominational groups are becoming important for that purpose. They advocate rights, champion causes, evangelize the populace, pursue avocations, lobby Congress, raise awareness, convene the public, and even build houses—all on the basis of religious beliefs and concerns. In that sense, they represent something beyond the confines of the ordinary. They point to values and motivations that transcend the practical concerns of the people who contribute to and participate with them. Paradenominational organizations, then, represent the sacred because they remind us that goodness and obligation and service continue to exist in the world and that we are better than our daily, relatively profane activities require us to be.

These groups function as emblems of personal transcendence even when we are not involved with them. They make the evening news, they occupy the free time (and maybe the conversations) of our neighbors, and their slogans and entreaties for support decorate the bumpers of the

cars that surround us in traffic jams. Even if we rarely get off our living room couches, these groups tell us that we live in a society replete with a transformative power for benevolence, as evidenced by the fact that others are somehow moved to get off their couches. For people active in these organizations, the sacred becomes a reality in their lives because it is institutionalized. Paradenominational groups make the sacred real because they mobilize resources that make people effective, they establish practices that people enact, they devise social roles that people fill, and they enliven the religiously informed symbolic frameworks people use to interpret and find meaning in their voluntary efforts. By institutionalizing an appreciation of the sacred, these groups make it an objectifiable component of the social world. As this appreciation enters people's awareness or incites their active commitment, it can become a part of their subjective identities as well. Institutions such as these construct a home for the sacred within our society. Paradoxically, it is a home that individuals construct while, at the same time, this sense of the sacred constructs individuals who are accustomed to the presence in their midst of something larger than themselves.

### **Paradenominational Organizations as Religious Adaptations to the Climate of Modernity**

Positing that paradenominational groups are gaining in significance as the public face of American religion because they represent the sacred does not mean that other kinds of religiously affiliated institutions do not perform a similar function. The key point is that this paradenominational form of religious commitment is growing for a reason: It is well adapted to the climate of modernity.

Without attempting casually to sum up the modern climate (or what some see as a burgeoning "postmodern" era), we can specify certain changes that have led to the success of paradenominational groups within the voluntary sector. At the most basic level, it is critical to understand that modern societies are institutionally differentiated societies.<sup>49</sup> The separation of such social entities as the state, market, science, and religion into autonomous institutional spheres, with their own values and means for performing their respective roles, was a dramatic shift from prior social arrangements.") In medieval society, a more unified schema prevailed, held together by the hegemonic worldview of

Western Christendom. In general, this was a profoundly undifferentiated social arrangement. Kings ruled by divine mandate, not by more inclusive political processes. Collecting interest was considered usury and therefore sinful, not a legitimate return on a financial investment. Galileo, among others, could be tried by Church tribunals for having the effrontery to disprove false cosmological theories. Religion, in short, was not only inseparable from the other institutional spheres, it dictated the very means by which they could operate.

That is not the case today. Rather than denoting an overall decline in religious belief and practice—something that the data thoroughly refute for the American context—the notion that ours is a secular society means that religion has become one differentiated sphere among others. Secularization basically amounts to an inability of religious authority and values to influence the other social spheres as thoroughly as they did in the past.<sup>51</sup> But how does this historical process account for the kind of climate in which paradenominational groups can emerge and thrive? Asking this question requires consideration of three additional characteristics of the modernization process: rationalization, pluralization, and subjectivization. They are consequences of societal differentiation; directly related to the issue of religious change, they are also prominently featured within the sociological literature on secularization.<sup>52</sup> Here I will summarize them briefly and explain how they have contributed to the emergence of paradenominational groups in the United States today.

### Rationalization

The differentiation of modern society means that, as well as being untethered from one another, these distinct institutional spheres gravitate in the direction of incremental rationalization. This term, rationalization, refers to the tendency for both individuals and organizations to plan their actions so as to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the means used to reach a particular end. As discussed earlier, the state and market spheres are directed toward rationalized methods of wielding power and accruing profit. Rational control systems can also be found in other institutions. Think, for instance, of the bureaucratized and results-oriented character of knowledge that predominates when colleges become transformed into “research” institutions. What rationalized institutions have in common is an instrumental ethos that discourages such nonrationalized expressive values as caring,

meaningfulness, and piety, which are typically considered irrelevant to their daily functioning.

This reality has important consequences for religious belief. The rationalization of public institutions demands that modern people assume an analytic and pragmatic cognitive **style** often at odds with the experience of the sacred that is characteristic of religious worldviews. **As** heirs of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, people today have generally come to assume that all phenomena can be explained rationally, and they are less likely to rely upon magic, myths, miracles, holy objects, or religious authorities to negotiate their everyday lives. Because a rationalist cognitive style governs the major institutional spheres of society, it largely undermines the credibility of religious meaning systems and religious ways of determining truth. Faced with what has been referred to as the “disenchantment of the world,”<sup>53</sup> individuals remain free to keep their own private lives enchanted with as many religious beliefs and practices as they like. But when interacting with the larger social world, they are significantly constrained to do so on the world’s own rationalized terms.

This might seem to make modern societies increasingly uninhabitable for religious institutions intent upon engendering a sense of the sacred in public. Yet such an assessment would underestimate the adaptability of religion. Rather than being corrosive to religious commitments, disenchanted institutional domains have actually proven to be catalysts for paradenominational groups. People do not form such groups for the purpose of determining the extent to which Jesus was fully human or fully divine. We do not receive direct-mail solicitations requesting support for groups organized to determine the truth of certain miracle stories found in the gospels or to persuade the public of their position regarding the virginity of Mary. There are no official taskforces charged with ascertaining, once and for all, the precise number of angels that can dance upon the end of a pin. Such issues may have mobilized the energies of people in the past, but modern people are left with primarily secular concerns to move them toward action. Involved as they are with rectifying political and economic injustices, perceived cultural maladies, and threats to individual rights, paradenominational groups are overwhelmingly oriented to this secular, disenchanted world, but in ways that do not exclude religious values. ‘-’ The sacred, in a sense, is discovered and represented — inhaled and exhaled — within the atmosphere of secularity itself.



In addition to influencing the social settings in which paradenominational groups operate, rationalization also informs the methods by which they operate. Even when they are not functioning particularly well or meeting individual needs, denominations and congregations can still count on the financial support of people who are denominationally loyal or who have strong neighborhood ties. This is much less true of paradenominational groups. They win support by virtue of their own merits and, unlike those other religious institutions, have to compete with secular organizations doing similar things. Since most paradenominational groups stay afloat by appealing to the public for financial assistance with specific projects, they usually feel pressed to accomplish those projects as expediently as possible in order to justify future contributions.” As anyone who reads the promotional literature of such groups can attest, they often make special efforts to assure their constituencies just how efficient and resourceful they are and how little they spend on operating costs (for staff, office space, and the like) that could detract from their stated goals. The implied message: The sacred is most clearly manifest in purposive, instrumental endeavors to get things done within the workaday world. It is about the effective, no-nonsense activity of people who know what to do and have learned—mostly through their secular educations and occupational experiences—how to do it. This understanding of the sacred is not necessarily any less sacred than that expressed in theological doctrine, both of the past and present, but it is different. And, to the extent that sacredness is borne by paradenominational groups, it exists amid a critical tension. These groups provide a glimpse of the sacred for those with eyes to see while also risking the possibility that it may ultimately be lost as the blinders of efficiency and public accountability become affixed to their organizational cultures.

### Pluralization

While the cognitive style associated with widespread societal rationalization presents a problem *for* religious belief, another characteristic of modernity, cultural pluralism, presents the problem *of* religious beliefs for paradenominational groups. In the absence of any single worldview able to claim monopoly status, myriad ideologies and traditions have proliferated within modern society. Increased urbanization, mass communications, and greater opportunities for travel have brought diverse subcultures into proximity with one another to an extent previously

unimaginable. The consequences for religious belief have been tremendous. Rather than being acquainted with a single religion endowed with a taken-for-granted aura of certainty, the modern person is exposed to a plurality of religious and secular worldviews that, insofar as they appear to be plausible ways of seeing the world, undermine the unquestioned adherence to any one of them.<sup>56</sup>

Let us look at this situation more closely. Surrounded by a multitude of feasible worldviews, people are accosted with what Peter Berger called “the heretical imperative,” the necessity of choosing a particular belief system while cognizant that it is one possible choice among others. This makes for a precarious, tentative venture. Instead of giving us continual social reinforcement for our religious convictions, pluralization brings regular interaction with individuals holding divergent views. Their ways of life and perspectives on the world are likely to be so different that they fail to provide the kind of social confirmation that subjective and inevitably chosen beliefs require to be believed without question. And question them we do. The pluralistic climate of modernity brings us to the realization that our own perspective on truth is just that: a single perspective among many others. With the noted seventeenth-century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, we are brought (sometimes dragging our feet) to the realization that truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other.<sup>57</sup> Thus, increasingly aware of the short distance between truth and error, people tend to cling less dogmatically to what they consider to be the truth and are generally more conciliatory toward others who appear to dwell — although fewer of us can be sure — in error.

Paradenominational groups once again prove themselves to be adaptive to this modern situation. In giving pride of place to their public ministries they, in effect, sidestep theological precepts and instead accentuate the ethical ramifications of diverse religious beliefs. They set aside dogmatism in an attempt to better meet the needs of a pluralistic society. For example, an evangelical Christian and her unchurched neighbor may be involved with the same hunger-relief organization. One may ground her commitment on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount while the other may have been moved by a United Nations report on rampant malnutrition in certain parts of the world or by a TV commercial featuring Sally Struthers. Whatever the case, the neighbors are able to reach a rapprochement because their shared ethical convictions are given priority over the divergent belief systems that they may hold rather loosely.

The sacred, paradenominational groups seem to suggest, is most adequately represented by ethical mandates largely derivable from common sense rather than from distinct theological doctrines. It is not the province of any one religious worldview to monopolize ultimate truth. These groups sacralize their ethical causes and make them accessible to ordinary people with a diversity of motivations. They are thus ideal organizations for mobilizing ordinary and diverse people within a pluralistic society. As with the issue of rationalization, however, pluralism tends to precipitate a critical tension within these groups. They must find a balance between the virtue of being nondogmatic and the vice of being so inclusive that they are no longer distinguishable from the larger society. Without the powerful symbols and narratives provided by particular normative traditions, they may fail to capture the imaginations and commitment of supporters. If that is the case, paradenominational groups may generate the kind of sound and fury that not only signifies nothing extraordinary but that accomplishes nothing at the same time.

### Subjectivization

At one time common wisdom held that, because of the increasing rationalization of social institutions, religious beliefs and values would recede from public affairs and become sequestered in the realm of private life. Religion, it was thought, would take the form of saying grace before meals, baptizing and marrying off children, and burying those loved ones we happen to outlive. It would function, as they say, merely as a "haven in a heartless world." But this purported common wisdom is actually neither. It was never particularly wise because the adaptability of religion has confounded the prognostications about its future. Nor was it ever particularly common since, if nothing else, the proliferation of paradenominational groups in the United States indicates that it is just as common for people to cast their religious commitments into the fray of public concerns.

Although not entirely privatized, a more nuanced look reveals religion to be quite subjectivized within modern society. No doubt this is partly due to the way cultural pluralism has loosened the grip of "objective" religious truth. It may also reflect an emerging (especially since the 1960s) "expressive individualism" in American culture exalting the unrestrained pursuit of new experience, personal autonomy, and self-realization.<sup>58</sup> Whatever the case, it is clear that a focus on the self now tends to dominate the other, once-prominent emphasis in American

religion—community belonging. Discerning meaning in the major events of the life cycle, enjoying a sense of emotional and psychological well-being, experimenting with various paths to self-fulfillment, “finding oneself”—these concerns focused on the self are rife among people professing to have religious sensibilities.

This third element of the modern religious climate is also partly responsible for the astounding growth of paradenominational groups. To understand this, keep in mind that transformations in the self need to be felt in order to be real. Little wonder that more and more people are flocking to religious forms that provide them with distinct, sometimes powerful, personal experiences of the sacred.<sup>59</sup> Immediately springing to mind are the spiritual practices associated with Eastern religions (such as meditation, yoga, and macrobiotic diets) and branches of the human-potential movement (*est*, Scientology), which have become popular by holding out promises of deeper, if not more esoteric, religious experiences. The same is true of the rapidly growing Pentecostal churches, for which ecstatic experiences are normative and understood within an explicitly Christian framework as gifts of the Holy Spirit. These examples and others suggest that the experiential is becoming more than the means to a spiritual end; it is becoming an end in itself. It is also something paradenominational groups offer their constituencies. Whether it is by building houses with Habitat or holding mass outside of a missile site with Pax Christi, these groups accost people with experiences they seldom have in everyday life. Even if their group is involved in more mundane activities—say a letter-writing campaign—when done in the company of others, people feel a more palpable sense of their own convictions. Participation, putting time into timeless ethical values, making a difference in a seemingly indifferent world—these are the kinds of experiences that make these groups popular and allow people to feel like the subjects of their own religious lives.

This emphasis on the self is also apparent in people’s sense of entitlement to religious “preference,” where once they would have remained in the faith communities into which they were born.”) Sociologically speaking, the limits to this kind of religious enfranchisement were once set by ascription. People’s social and cultural backgrounds helped determine the faiths they would claim for themselves and, therefore, functioned to restrict the possibility or even the desire for religious selectivity. But such sociocultural attachments have weakened considerably since World War II. Rising educational levels, opportunities for class

and geographic mobility, and family instability have all slackened traditional communal ties, including people's loyalties to religious communities. Now people "happen to be" a member of this or that religious community if they claim membership at all.<sup>61</sup> And even when they do associate with a particular religious institution, it is much more likely than in days past that they will privilege their own spiritual journeys over adherence to group norms. People are now free to choose among religious institutions and teachings, as if at a smorgasbord, rather than accept them as a single, unified set of values handed on by a community of believers.

Paradenominational organizations have adapted to this world of finicky religious consumers. By bringing specific ethical values into the public sphere, they appeal to people who hold those same values but do not want them to be mixed into a conglomeration of others they may not hold. The vast diversity of paradenominational groups, all engaged in religiously informed ethical pursuits, allows religious beliefs and values to be segmented into distinct units able to be picked and chosen from to suit individual spiritual needs.

Herein lies the danger of subjectivization for paradenominational groups. Their willingness to voice religiously derived expressive values in public can serve as a corrective for a retreat into the private realm and for a religious fixation on the self. If they succeed in this mission, there is reason to believe that these groups can become institutional sources for social capital, passing on a greater knowledge of public affairs, imbuing individuals with civic virtue, and convincing them that the rationalized social structures that shape our lives are not impervious to religious values emphasizing human dignity over instrumentality. As salutatory as this sounds, there is another possibility to ponder. These organizations may simply become vehicles for enhancing the personal well-being and self-realization of their participants and may jettison the larger communal purposes they usually claim to advance. Participants' expressive individualism may become separated from public obligation and degenerate into a therapeutic discourse that, despite the occasional religious platitude, is principally centered upon ensuring that they all feel good about themselves.

While some might say that the result would be an insipid, self-indulgent brand of religiosity, that is not the point. The crux of the issue is that sacralizing the individual self can lead, ironically, to the dehumanization of society. No one saw this more clearly than sociologist Thomas

Luckmann, who argued that self-realization had become the “invisible religion” of modernity. But, he continued, it came at the cost of leaving rationalized social structures unchecked and thus increasingly inimical to human flourishing. He offers few consolations regarding the kind of future that religious subjectivization may herald: “The modern sacred cosmos legitimates the retreat of the individual into the ‘private sphere’ and sanctifies his subjective ‘autonomy.’ Thus it inevitably reinforces the autonomous functioning of the primary institutions. By bestowing a sacred quality upon the increasing subjectivity of human existence it supports not only the secularization but also what we called the dehumanization of the social structure.”<sup>62</sup> At their very best, paradenominational groups, bugling religious values and narratives, embolden individuals and mobilize them so that they are not satisfied with a retreat into the private sphere. In good Tocquevillian fashion, these groups may shape people’s mores by moving individuals to see their own good as wedded to that of the others around them. Contrary to Luckmann’s pessimistic expectation that religious values would become invisible and innocuous features of personal identities, they may actually become visibly institutionalized by paradenominational groups and thus capable of stimulating people’s imaginations and patterning their actions.

Perhaps these things will happen. It would be speculative to suggest anything more definite because subjectivization presents these groups with an unsettling and unsettlable tension between an expressive infatuation with the self and a contrary insistence that religious values entail public responsibility. This is a tension just as rationalization presents these groups with the tension between discerning religious meaning within the secular world and being co-opted by secular organizational methods. Another tension is that accompanying pluralization, between an inclusive embrace of different values and a potentially anemic adherence to any set of particular religious values. Tensions abound in any organization. These tensions are particularly compelling within paradenominational organizations because they have assumed part of the burden of representing the sacred in our society. Obviously, they do not do this alone; churches, denominational structures, religious schools, monasteries, and public rituals all still have a role to play. Yet the role of paradenominational groups has expanded—not by divine fiat but because they represent a social form of religion that has steeled itself to the secular chill of modern times. As some might put it, while modernity constrains some institutional structures from growing successfully,

it enables others to do so as long as they are able to take advantage of whatever opportunities and resources the new conditions afford.<sup>63</sup> Paradenominational groups have done this by relocating the sacred within a modern world that, marked by the constraints of rationalization, pluralization, and religious subjectivization, many have considered to be successfully exorcised.

Religion abounds now, as it long has, in a voluntary sector created historically by religious dissent and enriched by a steady provision of religiously derived values and social capital. This sector has nurtured various social forms of religion as well as more secular associations, all of which have borne expressive values that, like seeds carried by the air, seldom grow on the rockier ground of the state and market sectors. Paradenominational groups are among the voluntary sector's most interesting and vibrant yields; this much has been discussed. The further question of how successful such groups are in enabling religious values to flourish and to escape being beaten down by other considerations is one that cannot be answered from afar. Rather, it is preferable to stop among their thick rows, stoop toward one of them, and examine it more closely. This is the primary intent of the following chapters, which will consider Habitat for Humanity, a paradenominational group that has grown so rapidly and extensively that it could hardly fail to capture the eye of anyone accustomed to lingering in this vast voluntary field.