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## BOOK REVIEW

# Why Religion Went Obsolete

The Demise of Traditional Faith in America by Christian Smith. Oxford University Press, 2024. \$35.00. pp.352.

Review by Renee Rheinbolt-Uribe <sup>1</sup>

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### Smith's Scholarly Trajectory

Christian Smith, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, has produced a body of work remarkable for its range and rigor. Coming from an Evangelical background and now a Roman Catholic, Smith has consistently brought sociological precision to questions of profound theological and cultural significance. His early work, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (1991), offered crucial insights into the social dynamics the liberation theology movement. His later explorations established him as a scholar explaining religion's persistence and transformation rather than its demise: *Souls in Transition* (2009) examined emerging adults and faith, *What Is a Person?* (2010) engaged fundamental questions about human existence, *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (2017, co-authored with Bridget Ritz and Michael Rotolo) explored intergenerational faith transmission, and *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (2017) demonstrated his capacity to analyze how religious practice endures and adapts.

That makes the present volume all the more striking. *Why Religion Went Obsolete* represents a significant shift in Smith's analysis. The book has received widespread attention, with reviewers praising it as "required reading for theologians and pastors" (*World Magazine*), offering "a new and important way of understanding" (*America Magazine*), and providing "an important corrective to theories of secularization" (*Marx*

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*and Philosophy Review of Books*). Yet true to form, the book does not disappoint, offering not despair but a call to discernment.

Smith's focus remains narrowly on the United States, and he deliberately does not address the global implications of the trends he documents. This is both a strength and a limitation. The strength lies in his refusal to overextend his sociological analysis beyond the United States context. The limitation is that these dynamics carry profound implications far beyond that demand missiological attention.

### Religious Self-Destruction, Not Secular Assault

Smith combines quantitative empirical measures of big-picture changes over time with exploration of the larger cultural environment, what he terms the cultural "zeitgeist." Drawing on extensive qualitative and quantitative data including over two hundred in-depth interviews, he argues that traditional American religion has become obsolete not through secularization's triumph but through institutional displacement.

Christian Smith posits that the convergence of world events around 1991, especially the end of the Cold War and the triumph of neoliberal capitalism, catalysed a decisive cultural shift and birthed a "Millennial Zeitgeist." This new era, characterised by radical individualism, consumer choice, and an earthly focus on markets and personal well-being, stripped traditional religion of its society binding functions and rendered it culturally "obsolete" by ceasing to be essential. Crucially, Smith refuses reductive explanations, arguing against classical secularisation theory that the decline stems from compounding specific forces including technological transformation, economic restructuring, shifting family dynamics, and evolving cultural attitudes, while he dismisses standard explanations like the influence of liberal universities as insufficient.

While many conservative commentators blame external forces like secular culture for religion's demise, Smith reframes this narrative by insisting a primary—though not sole—culprit is religious self-destruction. Linking this to the cultural shifts after 1991, he documents how sexual abuse scandals across Catholic, Southern Baptist, and megachurch traditions, financial improprieties, and damaging political entanglements directly undermined institutional trust and community. This internal corrosion aligns with the broader "Millennial Zeitgeist," where such failures became fatal for an institution already losing its social necessity. As sociologist Gerardo Martí notes in his *Commonweal* review, Smith argues that scandals, abuses of power, and exclusionary practices have crucially fuelled religion's obsolescence, demonstrating

that its decline resulted less from a direct secular assault than from a profound internal institutional failure that accelerated its cultural irrelevance.

### Global South Implications

For Global South scholars and church leaders, this represents a crucial warning: the greatest threat to Christianity's future may come not from hostile cultures or liberal education but from the church's own moral failures and compromising political alliances.

The cultural dominance of the United States, amplified through media and social media, ensures that what happens to American Christianity reverberates globally. Moreover, declining US church participation directly affects mission funding, theological education, and denominational partnerships throughout the Global South. Many churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania remain organisationally and theologically tethered to North American denominations. As US church attendance dwindles and giving declines, the financial architecture supporting global partnerships faces unprecedented strain.

Yet the implications extend beyond finances. For over a century, American Christianity has exported not merely resources but institutional forms, theological frameworks, and organisational models. What Latin American missiologist Samuel Escobar (1991) termed "managerial missiology" has shaped Global South Christianity through religious branded organisations (RBOs). Smith's analysis, while never explicitly engaging this genealogy, inadvertently documents the obsolescence of the very institutional Christianity that American mission exported globally. This dimension requires missiological engagement that Smith's sociological framework cannot provide.

### A Call to Hopeful Discernment

Importantly, Smith offers the book not as cause for despair but as call to discernment. He encourages readers not to seek simplistic answers or become discouraged by institutional decline. Rather, he invites careful attention to what God might be doing in this moment of history. Youth may not be engaging in organised religion, but God remains moving among them, as understood with the missiological term, *missio Dei*.

Shane Morris, reviewing the book for The Gospel Coalition, critiques Smith as "too fatalistic," pointing to emerging and hotly debated data showing Gen Z men trickling back into church. Yet Morris may misread Smith's intent. Smith's refusal to offer easy

predictions or prescriptive solutions reflects not fatalism but humility—a sociological realism that leaves room for the Spirit's surprising work. The book's hopeful posture points to the *missio Dei* and invites discernment precisely because God's action in history exceeds sociological categories.

Smith's deliberate focus on the American context, however, leaves crucial work for missiologists: to continue to explore how these dynamics affect global Christianity, to discern what forms of faith emerge when freed from dependency on Western institutional models, and to identify what God may be doing in contexts where Christianity has never been as institutionally dominant. The future of global Christianity may depend less on reviving what Smith documents as dying in America than on recognising and nurturing the forms of faith already being raised up. These may look less like the institutional Christianity exported from the West and more like the vernacular, relational, and embodied practices that have always existed at its margins but may now be moving to its centre. *Bottom line: I encourage you to read this fascinating and vital book.*

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