

Andrew M. Greeley, *Religious Change in America*

Andrew M. Greeley. *Religious Change in America*. Foreword by James A. Davis and John Modell. Social Trends in the United States series. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, Harvard University Press, 1989. 137 pp. \$25.00.

Andrew M. Greeley, the well known Roman Catholic scholar and novelist, presents here the striking argument that religion has not changed much in America in the last fifty years, at least not in ways that have been measured. He especially insists that there is no information to support the widely held belief that the American population is becoming increasingly secularized and less religious. This suggests that his title is something of a misnomer, though we should note that the book is part of a series sponsored by the Committee on Social Indicators of the Social Science Research Council and the series is clearly interested in documenting social change. Of course, the key to Greeley's argument has to do with what has and what has not been measured, and how accurately that has been done.

Greeley makes a clear statement of purpose: "This book is a modest attempt to ask how well religion has in fact fared in the United States since 1940, when survey research began to ask questions about American religious attitudes and behavior" (p. 2). His three major sources of data include the Gallup poll (American Institute of Public Opinion), the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan, and the National Opinion Research Center (of which he is a research associate) at the University of Chicago. These are national surveys from which he compares the answers to questions which have been asked—without any change of wording—over some period of time. He has more to work with, and therefore speaks with more confidence, in regard to the last twenty years being studied than with the first thirty. Against this available data, he tests five models: the secularization model, the cyclic model, the episodic event model, the stability model, and the religious growth model.

Chapter by chapter, the common presupposition of secularization and vast change is disproved and dismissed. Belief in God has been professed by 95-97% of the population through the years, and slightly more than 75% of the population has consistently expressed belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. America has been and continues to be a strongly denominational society, so that it is important for one's identity to be Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. The only changes in overall Protestant worship attendance can be accounted for by age: older people are more likely to be religious than younger people, so in those years when younger people made up a larger percentage of the population, there was an apparent decline in percentage of attendance, which disappeared as that group aged. Catholic worship attendance dropped sharply in real terms one time—following the Pope's letter on birth control—but then steadied due to what Greeley identifies as a "loyalty" factor. Frequent, personal prayer has remained at a fairly constant and high rate throughout the time of the surveys. Protestant contributions to church have remained steady (which is to say that they have increased tremendously and kept pace with inflation) while Catholic giving has declined. For most of the items being measured, the stability model best accounts for what has happened in religion in America in the last fifty years. There is simply no statistical evidence for increasing secularization.

Lest all of this sound too good to be true, mainline Protestant readers will want to pay careful attention to what might be called a "subplot": while overall Protestant commitment and religious behavior have remained strong and fairly constant, there have been tremendous changes taking place within Protestantism. Specifically, there have been major defections away from the four mainline denominations—Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopalian—and into "nonmainline" Protestantism—Baptist, "other," and nondenominational Protestants. Perhaps most importantly, it is those with the strongest indicators for religious devotion (worship attendance, prayer, etc.) that are moving away from the mainline churches and those with the weakest indicators for the same that are moving into them; obviously, this kind of trend may tend to perpetuate itself and even to accelerate. For those of us involved in both the preaching of the gospel and the stewardship of the particular institutions through which we have been nurtured in

the gospel, we cannot be comforted by Greeley's finding that overall Protestantism is remaining fairly constant in its strength.

While the strengths of such surveys as Greeley uses include using the same questions with large numbers of people over any number of years, surely one of the key weaknesses has to do with the wording of the questions and of the choices given as answers. For instance, one of the questions is "Do you think there is a heaven where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded?" (p. 14). This totally misses the understandings of sin and grace which are crucial at least to the official doctrine of the churches of a great many of the people being studied. Some questions have only two opposite choices for answers, while some offer a range of choices. Moreover, Greeley observes that the existing surveys do not yield information that relates religious behavior to other measures of activity. Thus he spends a chapter proposing questions about religious images as a better way for future surveys to get a handle on religion. The problem, of course, is that if most social scientists continue to hold their blind faith in the secularization model, despite Greeley's disproving it, they will not have any motivation to improve their studies on the religion which they assume to be declining.

Within the limits of its fairly broad strokes, Greeley's work presents a significant amount of data and helpful analysis thereof, especially as he sorts out whether reported changes are real or only apparent. This book will be informative and helpful for students of religion. It's running polemic against the secularization model is provocative, seems best to account for the information he presents, and should spark a great deal of discussion.