

Demassifying Religion: Futurist Interpretations of American Socioeconomic and Religious Change

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Abstract

This article consists of a critical examination of American religious movements in light of the futurist categories of Second and Third Wave socioeconomic change. Alvin Toffler's socioeconomic wave model is representative of shifting religious attitudes toward such socioeconomic change and sheds light on the evolution of religious thought during America's economic transitions. Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics were the dominant forces of mass religion in the Second Wave. Evangelicals, on the other hand, adopted Third Wave social and economic principles and emerged as the prominent American religious movement of the Third Wave; as society demassified, so did religious faith. Evangelical emphases on individualism and consumerism are examined as Third Wave socioeconomic values. In particular, the futurist wave model highlights the demassification of socioeconomic dynamics and consequently, the demassification of religion in public life. By understanding the relationship between socioeconomic and religious change in the American context, other societies that undergo similar transitions can adequately adapt, preempt conflict, and develop creative solutions to social problems.

Keywords: Demassification, futurism, socioeconomic change, religious change, individualism.

1. Introduction: Identifying Waves of Change

Beginning in 1970, futurist Alvin Toffler predicted a shift in developed nations from mass industrial societies to demassified information societies. Toffler (1989) described human societies in three basic stages: First, Second, and Third Wave societies. The waves, as Toffler described them, pushed preceding societies aside to make room for social and economic progress. Toffler's model provides a metaphor of human history, demonstrating the social evolution of humanity from a primitive hunter-gatherer society, to an agricultural (First Wave) to an industrial (Second Wave) and to a postindustrial technological society (Third Wave). Toffler's socioeconomic wave model, and the trends of the Third Wave in particular, were confirmed by other futurists, including Drucker (1950, 1989) and Naisbitt (1982).

First Wave societies (primary sectors), according to Toffler, are agrarian societies where land ownership and the product and trade of agricultural goods dictate the success of the economy. Second Wave societies (secondary sectors), according to Toffler, are industrial economies where factory labor, manpower, and mass production dictate economic success.

Third Wave societies (tertiary and quaternary sectors) are information societies where technology, data, and knowledge are paramount to the outmoded forms of Second Wave industrialism. The critical driving force of economic growth in the Third Wave are not the "super normal profits that technological change generates but the continuous creation of opportunities for further technological development" (Carlaw & Lispey, 2003, p. 457). The Third Wave, according to Toffler, is the wave of

perpetual technological progress that replaces the industrialism of the Second Wave. In America, the Third Wave has already eclipsed the Second Wave, while in the Developing World, the Second Wave is only beginning. In Toffler's model, the Second Wave represents the era of massification: mass media, mass production, and mass social movements. The Third Wave, however, represents the era of demassification and individualism.

2. Religious Values and Socioeconomic Change

Changes in public "theological dominance" have been identified as harbingers of broader political and social changes (Philips, 2006, p. 118). Religion has a generative social power and its influence historically affects social values. Economic issues relevant to socioeconomic change have been present in American religious life since the nation's inception. Just as Toffler's model of society and economics is represented in waves, religious faith as a social construct also changes; religion itself changes, adapting to the needs and ideologies of communities and individuals.

In like manner, religious faith contributes to the American understanding of the nature of work, wealth, and social responsibility. Historically, religious traditions and movements displayed remarkably distinct patterns of both withdrawal from and engagement with American public life as social and economic progress occurs (Regnerus & Smith, 1998). Whether the influence of religion on economics is positive or negative, it is an historical and contemporary reality that must be engaged. Toffler's socioeconomic wave model is representative of shifting religious attitudes toward socioeconomic change and sheds light on the evolution of religious thought during America's economic transitions. In particular, Toffler's model highlights the demassification of socioeconomic dynamics and consequently, the demassification of religious faith in public life. As Toffler (1978) noted, the "old ability of the industrial powers to push the rest of the world around is now at an end, placing new constraints on the further development of the high technology nations" (p. 36). By understanding the relationship between socioeconomic and religious change in the American context, other societies that undergo similar transitions can adequately adapt.

2.1 The Second Wave and Socioeconomic Massification

The early German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) defined the theologically infused economic principle known as The Protestant Ethic in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904). The Spirit of Capitalism was, according to Weber, an *ethos*, "not mere business astuteness, but the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself" (Weber, 1958, p. 51). The Protestant Ethic engendered the idea that the harder one works and the more property and capital one accumulates, the godlier one becomes. Protestant Puritans saw property and capital as a divine calling of which they were stewards, liberals saw property as a self-evident natural right for private persons (Stackhouse, 1984, p. 70). The concept of increased individual capital was foundational to the success of industrialism, mass production, and factory labor in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

According to Weber, the success of capitalism depended on the embrace and internalization of certain socio-religious values. Weber noted that during the Industrial Revolution, it was not the capitalistic entrepreneurs of the commercial aristocracy who were the predominant bearers of the spirit of capitalism; it was, according to Weber, much more the rising strata of the lower industrial class (Weber, 1958). Weber argued that Protestants who did not come from dynastical families of Europe were empowered by the Protestant Ethic to commence the entrepreneurial industrialization of the American manufacturing enterprise. Through an emphasis on vocation, the Protestant Ethic affirmed the necessary freedom for persons in society to perform pre-given patterns of social roles and to be afforded sufficient social space for the working out of godly duty. The logic and social psychology of the argument were vital to the development of cities in the Western World where "peasants and freemen became artisans, tradesmen, merchants, and manufacturers, and above all citizens with self-governing responsibilities", leading to innovative social change (Stackhouse, 1984, p. 59).

Puritan virtues were eventually usurped and replaced by a system of capitalism that no longer required ascetic values for perpetuation. The shift in socio-religious values occurred during the aggressive

industrialization and massification of the United States economy in the decades following the 1850s (Eckel, 1920, p. 48). According to Stackhouse (1984), the first true test of American Human Rights philosophy was during the Civil War, where the issue not only concerned the ethical veracity of slavery, but the conflict between burgeoning commercial and manufacturing economies of the north and the southern plantation owners. The Civil War economy stimulated an American entry into the Industrial Revolution and corporations as social institutions became less a covenantal fellowship of those called to be responsible stewards for the glory of God and mutated into a “legal fiction by which to gain wealth” (Stackhouse, 1984, p. 81). Weber believed that the new emphasis of the spirit of capitalism caused material goods to gain an unparalleled control over the individual which led to the more aggressive form of materialism that later concerned Karl Marx.

Due to the rise of a technical civilization, the Protestant ethic began to erode into a “secularized, hollowed-out version of the work ethic”. Such erosion was illustrated by Calvin Coolidge, who said, “he who builds a factory, builds a temple, and he who works there, worships there” (as reported by Colson and Eckard, 1991, p. 39). Factory labor demanded workers who showed up on time, who would take orders from a management hierarchy without questioning, and were prepared to slave away at machines or in offices, performing brutally repetitious operations (Toffler, 1980, p. 29). As work processes were deskilled and routinized, workers were subjected to intense scrutiny (Budd & Brimlow, 2002, p. 29). The transformation of the Protestant ethic sparked a corresponding development of a social emphasis in religion that fell in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Mathews, 1927, p. 376). As industrialization became part of the American experience, for both American Protestants and European Catholic immigrants, religious communities focused on urban-industrial problems.

American industrialism peaked in the twentieth century and factory labor increased as rumors of jobs invited disadvantaged immigrants from Europe (Stackhouse, 1984). America rapidly urbanized with pockets of ethnic communities scattered throughout the Northeast. Immigrants settled in cities as American industrial workers. Immigrants, who were primarily Catholic, strived to provide a better standard of living for their families through the abundant work opportunities that were available in industrial America. Lance Morrow (1981) asserted that the immigrant work ethic came at last to merge with the Protestant work ethic. In like manner, it was the religious faith and the religious community that supported immigrant workers (Kurth, 1999, p. 99).

2.2 The Second Wave and the Dominance of Massified Religion

Second Wave religious attitudes were marked by a communitarian worldview that stressed the horizontal aspect of religion: the call to demonstrate love toward one’s neighbor by building community among interdependent individuals (Penning & Smidt, 2002, p. 98). Independent labor organizations emerged during American industrialism. The labor organizations, or unions, were found singing hymns on the picket lines, demonstrating that workers could form solidarities as independent congregations recapitulated in the economic sphere from earlier theological constructs of human rights (Stackhouse, 1984, p. 83). In the face of deplorable working conditions, long hours, unsafe equipment, and low wages, laborers found a religious solidarity in mass organization.

Within a generation, the Industrial Revolution created such problems for religion as to lead to “a vigorous enunciation of a social ethic by alert religious leaders” (Handy, 1949, p. 114). Religious communities thereby became increasingly engaged in social issues. Second Wave religious values focused on advocacy for oppressed groups. Factions of the Mainline Protestant denominations, both puritanical and liberal, saw the need for a “fundamental public theology to give affirmative shape to social institutions and to combat the superpersonal forces of evil” in society; Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) and other theologians in Mainline Protestantism introduced and promoted “The Social Gospel” as an alternative to the prevailing forms of the Protestant Ethic (Stackhouse 1984, p. 84).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, American Catholicism grew rapidly due to the inflow of European immigrant laborers. Catholics interpreted social concern as a missionary field open to conversion. The clergy of ethnic parishes had a multifunctional social role: the idea that clergy should be concerned about jobs and the social and economic welfare of people was a prevailing view. The new pastoral strategy of American Catholicism was adaptive rather than defensive. Because the

majority of immigrant Catholic parishioners were laborers, the Catholic Church took a strong interest in organized labor. The openness of the Catholic Church to organized labor was formalized in 1891 by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. An early alliance between the Catholic Church and American labor was a significant factor in preventing the emergence of a revolutionary labor movement in the United States (Abell, 1968, p. 143). The Jesuits, for example, formed labor schools to train workers in union organization and industrial relations.

The American Catholic Church argued that work is “not an individualistic enterprise; rather it is social” (Russo & Corbin, 1999, p. 82). Whereas American Catholicism was not as committed to capitalism as the proponents of the Protestant ethic, it viewed socialism as a poor alternative as “bureaucracy, political tyranny, the helplessness of the individual as a factor of the ordering of his own life, and in general social inefficiency and decadence” (Catholic Bishops of the United States, no.33, 1919).

In the Second Wave, religious communities, bound together by common ethnicity and creed, sought social justice for the collective whole. The emphasis of justice was not on individual workers, but on entire populations of working class people, immigrants, and the underrepresented. Religion massified.

2.2 The Third Wave and Socioeconomic Demassification

The Second Wave soon gave way to the Third Wave and socioeconomic dynamics in America radically changed. Unlike previous waves of change, the Third Wave is peculiarly characterized by technology. Weber recognized that the modern Western form of capitalism was strongly influenced by the development of technological possibilities. Toffler (1994) noted an early indication of a technological shift in society and industry when the Second Wave’s smokestack economy was fading and a new Third Wave economy was born. The indication of the approaching end of the Second Wave was in 1956, the first year in which white-collar and service employees outnumbered blue-collar factory workers in the United States (Toffler, 1994, p. 41). The Third Wave followed with a rapid increase of technology, including the emergence of cellular telephones, satellite television, and the Internet, outmoding the older forms of Second Wave industrialism. Communities that once relied on mass media and social structures were individually empowered by personal computers, smart phones, and consumer credit with the advent of the Third Wave (Lukes, 2007). By the peak of the Third Wave, demassified social media supplanted outmoded forms of mass communication (Chu & Chan, 2009).

The Third Wave brought with it a redefinition of capitalism, focused not on production, but on consumption (Peters, 2009). At the helm of the Third Wave, organized labor, wounded by years of union-busting and deindustrialization, decreased to less than 10% of the private-sector workforce and seemed to “disappear altogether from the popular consciousness” (Frank, 2000, p. 1). Service jobs replaced many of the well-paid positions lost in manufacturing. In the Third Wave American jobs created by high-tech globalization replaced the low-tech jobs lost to competition under Free Trade agreements (Cetron & Davies, 2005, p. 39). There was no direct demand for labor in the Third Wave economy. Instead, demand for labor was derived from product demand, the goods and services workers made, which sparked demand for people to make them (Hill, 2001, p. 61). Massified, organized labor, once dominant in the Second Wave, was eclipsed by the demands of an individualistic Third Wave workforce driven by technological advancement (Pipek & Wulf, 2009). The American workforce is demassifying and the industrial era of manufacturing is conceding to the rise of creative innovation (Galligan, 2008).

Moreover, the once dominant paradigm of unions versus corporations became obsolete in the Third Wave. In place of unions and corporations negotiating for mutual benefit, the Third Wave brought powerful forces inspiring demands for greater transparency and accountability in large institutions; a byproduct of Second Wave religious demands for social justice (Cetron & Davies, 2005, p. 39). Thus, greater transparency and greater corporate responsibility characterize Third Wave socioeconomic change. Where corporations are more open to scrutiny and organized labor is a less relevant factor, the Third Wave is symbolized by a dramatic demassification of industry, society, and economics (Webster, 2004).

An overwhelming increase in individualism was one of the major social changes that occurred in the West during the second half of the twentieth century (Crompton, 2002, p. 537). Beginning in the 1970s, “American political and intellectual elites began to promote the ideology of universal human rights as the rights of individuals” (Kurth, 1999, p. 8). The more contemporary concept of individual human rights stood in contrast with earlier social movements where the rights of entire social segments of society, such as labor union and racial groups, were emphasized over individual rights (Collins, 2005, p. 109). For example, Second Wave religious leaders lobbied for the rights of women, laborers, and African Americans. However, human rights philosophy in the Third Wave economies, emphasizes individual human rights over the rights of groups.

Toffler (1980) forewarned that there would be a clash of civilizations between social segments committed to maintaining the Second Wave and social segments committed to Third Wave progress. Toffler predicted that society would be divided between Second Wave people committed to maintaining the dying order and Third Wave people committed to constructing a “radically different tomorrow” (Toffler, 1980, p. 16). Individualistic consumers of the Third Wave clashed with the mass communities of the Second Wave.

Although Toffler and other futurists predicted the economic shift from industrial manufacturing to information technology for some time, massified labor, media, and religion did not heed the call. Second Wave political lobbies and labor unions continued to cling to the power of the unskilled American labor of Second Wave industrialism (Toffler, 1994, p. 34). The transition into the Third Wave was stifled by Second Wave resistance to Third Wave economic and social trends. Social struggles in the Third Wave society are in effect conflicts between older community values and newer individualistic values (Russo, 2004, p. 628).

As society increasingly demassifies, media, families, and even religion follows suit (Toffler, 1980, p. 165). In the Third Wave, both the market and the people are “understood as grand principles of social life rather than particulars, and thus are seen as one in the same” (Frank, 2000, p. 1). A new individualistic ideology characterized by consumer sovereignty in economics dominates the Third Wave (Kurth, 1999, p. 8). As such, the amount of outstanding consumer credit more than doubled between 1980 and 1990. Consumerism and individualism reign supreme in the Third Wave society and economy (Philips, 2006, p. 271).

2.3 The Third Wave and the Rise of Demassified Religion

The individualism that characterizes Third Wave economics is similarly evident in the rise of American Evangelicalism near the end of the Second Wave. Evangelicals largely preach an individual gospel focused on the transformation of individual lives by means of personal conversion (Penning & Smidt, 2002, p. 98). In the mid-1980s, 33% of participants told the Gallup Poll that they had been personally born again and by the early 2000s, 46% concurred (as reported by Philips, 2006, p. 106). Unlike the religion of the Second Wave, the individualistic worldview of Evangelicals insists that social problems are “best addressed by changing individual hearts rather than by reforming social institutions” (Penning & Smidt, 2002, p. 117). Thus, Evangelicals effectively demassified religious faith.

Evangelicalism adapted to the “self-aggrandizement economics” of the 1980s, which is one of the reasons why it became so popular during that decade (Balmer 2004, p. 2). Further, like the suburbanization of work in the Third Wave, Evangelicalism became a “rather shallow suburban experience” (Matzat 1995, p. 2). Patterns of Evangelical affiliation in the Third Wave were shaped less by the Second Wave ethno-religious patterns of belonging, and more by “individuals who decided whether the church was meeting their particular needs or serving them as they wished” (Penning & Smidt, 2002, p. 102).

Unlike the more dominant forces of Mainline Protestantism and Roman Catholicism of the Second Wave, Evangelical denominations and independent churches adopt a free market philosophy of church growth: religion of the Third Wave utilizes the latest in advertising and marketing techniques to sell religion to individual consumers (Budd & Brimlow, 2002, p. 47). Just as Third Wave individualism is accompanied by consumerism, Third Wave religious faith marks the demassified consumerization of religion as well. The consumerism of the Third Wave feeds the notion that “faith

is an individualistic product” to be marketed (Budd & Brimlow, 2002, p. 47). Kale (2004) noted a greater thrust toward the individualization of spirituality among consumers that characterizes modern Evangelicalism. Most Evangelical clergy had the opportunity to effectively market his or her church like an entrepreneur would market a product. In the Third Wave, Evangelical religion was largely a competitive market segment. Further, desperation to compete for theological dominance initiated the rush to “market the faith” in advent of the Third Wave (Budd & Brimlow, 2002, p. 75).

Huntington (1996) noted that as the individualism and consumerism that characterize contemporary Evangelicalism spread through a globalized economy, there is almost no resistance in those nations with a Protestant tradition, however, there is some resistance in those with a Roman Catholic tradition. Thus, the early roots of the pre-massified Protestant Ethic are foundational to cultivating Third Wave demassification. According to Strenski (2004), “economic globalization requires ideological legitimization and the primary ideologies which inform globalization are explicitly theological” (p.631). Moreover, Third Wave globalization retains traces of reliance on its original religious basis: the individualistic Protestant Ethic. The globalization that characterizes the Third Wave can thus be traced to proto-Evangelical values. By breaking up and dissolving every traditional, local, and national structure, globalization brings about the “universal triumph of expressive individualism” (Kurth, 1999, p. 4). Accordingly, American Evangelicalism “sanctified market capitalism and raised individualism to theological prominence” (Budd & Brimlow, 2002, p. 128).

The dominant emphasis of demassified Evangelicalism of the Third Wave leans toward a “seductive, commercial gospel” in contrast with the social gospel of the Second Wave (Matzat 1995, p. 2). The consumerism of free market economics that characterizes Evangelicalism in the Third Wave sets it apart from the struggles for economic justice of the working class of Mainline Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in the Second Wave. Therefore, Evangelicals adopted Third Wave social and economic principles and emerged as the prominent American religious movement of the Third Wave. As society demassified, religion demassified.

3. Conclusion and Implications: Tempering Religious Change

Religious revolutions, especially when coupled with socioeconomic revolutions, disrupt the traditions and customs and threaten “security, safety, and identity” (Kurth, 1999, p. 1). The transition to the Third Wave threatens many economic, social, and religious securities. Without new coalitions and alliances, organized labor, religious institutions, and community groups are marginalized in an increasingly competitive and individualistic society (Russo & Corbin, 1999, p. 82). The prominence of Evangelicalism in the Third Wave marks new challenges for religious communities confronting the painful transition out of the Second Wave (Novak, 1981, p. 355).

Moreover, Toffler (1994) maintained that “free-marketism and trickle-down twisted into rigid theological dogma” are inadequate responses to the socioeconomic changes initiated by the Third Wave (p.76). As the American economy transitions out of the Second Wave and into the Third Wave, the religious community has a strategic part to play. A shift in economics requires a shift in theological perspective from the religious community to determine how to “make a demassified society moral and fair” (Toffler, 1994, p. 77). The Third Wave, according to Toffler, demassifies culture, values, and morality. As Second Wave supporters fight to retain or restore mass society, Third Wave supporters determined how to make de-massification work (Toffler, 1994, p. 84). In this ideological struggle, religious communities play a significant role in shaping the Third Wave society and the socioeconomic issues of demassification.

The Third Wave is a socioeconomic reality in America. The challenge that faces the religious community is not a matter of polarization, but to formulate a new comprehensive theology and social action that addresses the moral crises of the Third Wave transition. The challenge is to preserve the dignity of individuals and meet the human needs presented by the transformation of corporations and bureaucracies, while challenging the selfsame corporations and governments to do justice. As Novak (1993) suggested, the ethic proper to political economy is an ethic of prudence, suffused with charity, of justice tempered with mercy. The transition from the Second Wave to the Third Wave requires a calculated religious response to ensure that the transition is as just as possible. By understanding the

relationship between socioeconomic and religious change in the American context, other societies that undergo similar transitions can adequately adapt, preempt conflict, and develop creative solutions to social problems.

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