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UNFED SHEEP IN AN AGE OF UNBELIEF

An essay presented to the Chit Chat Club of San Francisco

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•Jordan Thomas Rundell and Maximilian Peter Sinsteden were married Nov. 2 in New York. Dr. Rachel Adams Greenup, the sister of Mr. Sinsteden and a minister of the American Marriage Ministries, officiated, with Travis E. Rundell, the twin brother of Mr. Rundell, taking part in the ceremony, which was at the apartment of a friend of the couple (November 3, 2019).

•Stephanie Carmen Mendez and Zachary David Hamlin-Leopold were married Nov. 2 at the W Hotel in Hoboken, N.J. Gabriel Acosta-Cohen, a friend of the couple who became a Universal Life minister for the event, officiated (November 3, 2019).

•Nadia Sirota and James Benjamin Lemkin were married Oct. 22 at the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur, Calif. Soaring Starkey, an interfaith minister ordained by the New Seminary of New York City, officiated. (October 27, 2019)

These wedding announcements from the Styles Section of the Sunday *New York Times* illustrate milestone changes taking place in American religious practices. Whether couples are white or black, heterosexual or same-sex, Jewish or Christian or Moslem, what all of these wedding announcements—and countless others—have in common is one thing: the celebrants have “deputized” a family member or friend to officiate at their ceremony, or have engaged a mail-order “clergy person” who has purchased quickie “ordination” from a dubious online, “seminary.” The Universal Life Church Ministry whose slogan is “We are all children of the same universe” claims over 20 million ordained ministers—all with little or no training in theology, pastoral care, counseling, or homiletics. Many have found a lucrative source of income in the wedding and funeral business. Nevertheless, one organization’s Ministerial Training Center offers mail-order guidance on everything related to running a church, from financial matters to ceremony instructions for baptisms, funerals, and delivering sermons.

I am dazzled by the array of products and services offered by these online “seminaries”—keepsake marriage certificates, ministerial credentials and manuals, letters of good standing, customizable wedding scripts, registration instructions for various states, inclusion in a minister directory, instructions for ordained-minister tax deductions (parenthetically, the IRS is on to quickie ordines who attempt to write off huge expenses on their tax returns). For \$45 you can get the Minister

Ordination Package, which includes a wedding stole and, *Asked to Officiate*, billed as the definitive book on performing weddings. For \$95.00 you will receive the premium, “Will You Marry Us Package.” Universal Life Ministries offers an extensive catalogue of dozens of books, clergy garb, emergency wedding sets (I can only imagine what that is), impressive-looking credentials, including a Jedi Knight Certificate, and of course, the indispensable ordination wallet license. To think that I spent five years of postgraduate study in a rabbinical seminary when I could have received an impressive certificate of ordination simply by registering and paying the required fees! Whereas no one would dream of going to a doctor or therapist who received online training, many people have no difficulty entrusting their most intimate life-cycle events to mail-order officiants.

I have attended a few wedding ceremonies officiated by mail-order clergy. Take someone who is not trained as a public speaker, writer, or officiant and put him/her in front of an audience of well-wishers and disastrous missteps can occur ala Rowan Atkinson in “Four Weddings and a Funeral” in which the bewildered officiant jumbles the liturgy and confuses the names, and gender of the bride and groom. I admit that it is also possible for a legitimate clergyperson to be a fool, but years of study and practice make it far less likely that he will do a poor impersonation of a comedian or an MC.

I have attended a few wedding ceremonies officiated by deputized mail-order clergy. Sometimes the words of the officiant are heartfelt and endearing, especially when there is a lifelong connection to the celebrants. Other times, the officiant mumbles, rambles on and on, cries, uses humor inappropriately, or makes it difficult to make sense of the remarks and the pronouncement. I remember one officiant father who began remarks to his son by saying, “You were bloody at birth” and then went on and on about his child’s entire life history, much to the displeasure of the bride and her family.

Conducting a meaningful wedding ceremony or a consoling funeral with a spiritual dimension is challenging for anyone, but when a clergyperson has a long-time relationship with celebrants, he can bring to bear the memories of love ones long gone, family celebrations of years past, personal insights at having watched a bride or groom grow from childhood to maturity.

I consider some of the reasons that fewer people have long-term, meaningful relationships with a church or synagogue or with a respected clergyperson.

First, the rise of social isolation and loneliness:

Enormous change is sweeping across both civil and religious institutions where strategies that once attracted increasing numbers of members no longer do so. In addition to religious institutions in decline, interest in and support of fraternal organizations such as Kiwanis, Rotary, Freemasons, Odd Fellows, Loyal

Order of Moose, veterans' organizations, the League for Women Voters, bowling leagues, and PTAs are waning. The Elks have struggled with massive decline in membership as society has moved away from Ralph and Alice Kramden toward Will & Grace [for those not familiar with Will & Grace, the show focuses on the relationship between best friends Will Truman (Eric McCormack), a gay lawyer, and Grace Adler (Debra Messing), an interior designer.] The Elks, whose average member is 65+, have lost approximately 600,000 members to old age, death, and indifference since 1980.

Furthermore, the emergence of the gig economy, which represents 34% of today's workforce and expected to rise to 43% next year, may mirror the fact that fewer people feel an obligation to support traditional institutions and to build lasting relationships. Instead they dip in and out of organizations on an as-need basis, much like calling an Uber, renting an Airbnb, or utilizing a ZipCar rather than purchasing a vehicle or staying in a hotel—all resulting in deepening detachment from the permanence of ownership, friendships, and relationships, many of which used to be centered in houses of worship. And ironically, this trend coexists with increased interest in spirituality.

A Pew Study (2019) released last month focuses on the sharp decline in US religious practice and affiliation. It claimed to be the result of a social reordering in which the ranks of people who don't adhere to any faith is growing at the same time that church attendance is falling steeply. "Nones (spell)," now comprise 25% of the population, up from 17% a decade ago. U.S. church membership was 70% or higher from 1937 through 1976, falling modestly to an average of 68% in the 1970s through the 1990s, still among the highest rate of church affiliation and attendance in the world according to a Gallup Poll (2019) published this year. Now only 45% of adults said they attend church at least once a month.

Strained overloaded schedules leave little time beyond work, childcare, unending errands, and coordinating work and school schedules. Today, few people have consistent workdays. Most service workers have fluctuating schedules. Working at Amazon, for example, often means working exceedingly long nights and weekends, all subject to change without notice. Communal and religious activities fall by the wayside because of open-ended schedules and exhaustion.

An article by Judith Shulevitz in this month's *The Atlantic* entitled, "Why Don't I See you Anymore—Our Unpredictable and Overburdened Schedules Are Taking a Dire Toll on American Society," notes that the unfinished business of the workday beckons workers to open their phones or laptops at home after work, when supposedly not working, in order to deal with "urgent" emails.

According to the Pew Study (2019), forty percent of millennials are unaffiliated. A recent Cigna Insurance Company survey of social isolation (2018) studied 20,000 Americans and found that almost 50% of 18-22-year-old population

is the loneliest segment. The overuse of technology—social-media platforms, dating and hookup apps, cell phone usage, walking while listening, all replace genuine human interaction. Facebook friending is an inauthentic form of friendship because it allows relentless enhanced and filtered exploits of peers compared to one's own. Thus, technology creates superficial friendships that can be unfriended with the touch of a screen. The net-net effect of isolating technology is not only loneliness but self-absorption, selfishness, and seclusion. By extension, such inability to form deep lasting relationships also impacts associations with clergy, teachers, and mentors. In short, the connection between the new media and anxiety also makes it nearly impossible for people young and old to have disconnected moments of peace.

Furthermore, social isolation is compounded by the belief that it is possible to do two or more things well at the same time—multitasking, skimming incoming data, picking out the relevant details, and moving on to the next stream—termed “continuous partial attention”—paying attention, but only partially. The impact on civility, manners, and interpersonal communication is noticeable. Look around any restaurant and see numerous diners texting and not talking to each other. I regularly see worshippers checking email and texting during worship services and life-cycle ceremonies.

Almost 20 years ago, author Robert Putman wrote the troubling book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). He pointed out the pulling inward, away from neighborhoods, friendships, family, and faith communities, at the same time that technology is increasingly leading to social isolation, loneliness, and uncivil behavior. Putman was prescient, noting loss of “social capital,” that essential part of community that helps people find jobs, solve problems, control crime, and foster a sense of community well-being. As the connections to clergy and religious institutions grow thinner, there is less of a compelling reason to have a clergy person officiate at life-cycle events in a house of worship.

Second, the rise of intermarriage, the inability to decide the officiating clergy person's religion, and what religious customs to practice in married life:

The path of least resistance when a couple is unable to decide about the role of religion at their ceremony and in their new home is to deputize a family member or friend to officiate at their wedding, thereby skirting the issues. It is an increasing challenge how to encourage strong faith-based lives of children whose parents choose to practice different religious traditions or no such traditions. This act of blending two halves into a single hybrid, called by one half-Jewish woman “a dazzling act of existential virtuosity,” defines the tension inherent in blending two cultures where a half-and-half-child often is

ashamed of his “neitherness,” and is treated like an outsider with a low probability of ever becoming an insider. Jeff Kent, a half-Jewish/half-Southern Baptist actor and comedian, suggests such a dilemma should be addressed by a Twelve-Step Program. And certainly, there are those who deal with their nervousness about the subject by telling funny stories like that of half-Jewish/half-Irish Catholic comic Bill Maher who joked, “I used to go into confession, and I would bring a lawyer with me.” In the confessional I would begin by saying, ‘Bless me father for I have sinned;’ and then add, ‘I think you know Mr. Cohen over here.’”

A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life entitled “Eastern, New Age Beliefs Widespread: Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths (2009)” concluded that the United States is a nation of “religious drifters.” Americans in general, are struggling to invent new ways of describing and participating in a faith that is often unresponsive to societal change. Individual postmodern beliefs are eclectic, a patchwork quilt. Faith and religious commitments are private and self-centered, as increasing numbers of people “customize” their beliefs and practices. Instead of religion defining them, they define religion. Unlike previous generations that emphasized study, prayer, and charitable acts, the postmodern faithful may ignore intellectual rigor, communal prayer, organized congregations and denominations, and place greater emphasis on reflective spiritual intention, or what Buddhists call “mindfulness,” than on liturgical and theological issues. Under the rubric of the new spirituality, sermons, scholarly discourses, and learned homilies are less cognitive and more affective. Flannery O’Connor once commented that “glibness is the great danger in answering people’s questions about religion.” The tension found in such transformation is the substitution of kitsch for authentic knowledge, study, and worship.

Third, the rise of “Nones” and the Spiritual But Not Religious:

Increasing numbers of Americans describe their connection to faith as “spiritual but not religious.” Post-denominational Americans may only occasionally dip into the formal religious community, if at all. Most often clergy have fleeting or little contact with this growing fringe of the religious community.

Nones cite many reasons other than lack of belief for staying home, for lack of affiliation, including: “I haven’t found a place of worship I like”, “I practice my faith in other ways”, “I don’t like the sermons”, “I don’t feel welcome”, “I don’t have the time”, “I’m in poor health and don’t get around”, “there isn’t a church for my religion nearby” (Pew Study 2018)

David Brooks, in *On Paradise Drive* (2005), defines the postmodern world, whose changes are overtaking religion, education, politics, and social mores. Postmodernism’s influence on religion is best characterized as the desire to think

and act independently of institutional religion that long dictated theology, ritual, and worship, resulting in fragmentation, alienation, and sacred search. The complaint that “nothing is the way it once was” is a popular refrain among people as they grow older and is intensified by postmodernism’s “gift” of the elimination of absolute truths and a hierarchy of immutable values that individuals could once look to for comfort.

Those of us who are the products of supplemental religious education are well aware of its inability to produce knowledge of any depth. As one woman put it,

When I was little, my family belonged to a Conservative synagogue, a nice old shul with a very kind elderly rabbi. Then we moved to a congregation that was the epitome of the suburban soul-less Conservative synagogue (the most enduring thing I learned there was how to smoke cigarettes!). I had Hebrew school for several hours two nights a week for four years, Sunday school for hours every Sunday, and starting in 7th grade, I was required to attend the four-hour-long Shabbos services every Saturday morning, most of which, of course, was in Hebrew, and almost none of which I could understand, since all we learned in Hebrew School was the same 10 words over and over. It always struck me as so odd that I managed to become fluent in four languages other than English, but that even after four years of Hebrew school, about the only Hebrew I knew was aba--father, ema--mother, yelid--chile, bakbuk yayin—bottle of wine, mi--who, sheli--mine, *Eretz Yisrael--Israel and Mitzrayim--Egypt*. After my confirmation in 10th grade, I was so turned off by my Conservative shul experience that I don’t think I set foot in a synagogue again for 20 years.

I won’t spend time on widespread clergy misconduct and its impact on the faithful and the churchd as well as the unchurched, because you are all well aware of the damage this tragedy has done to those whose religious attachment was always a powerful part of their lives.

So many spiritual-but-not religious individuals are defined by simple ignorance of rites, rituals, and history. Religion in America has been described by Rice University sociologist Michael Lindsay as “3,000 miles wide but only three inches deep (Glenn, Leonard 2008).” A Pew study entitled “Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths (2009)” concludes that contemporary Americans know almost

nothing about their own religious traditions and even less about the traditions of others and flit from one religious affiliation to another. The study employs the terms: “swingers”, “switchers”, “religiously promiscuous”, and “religious infidelity” for those who belly up to the so-called “divine deli” and sample religious beliefs and practices other than their own, evidence of the death of denominationalism. Stephen Prothero (2009), professor of religion at Boston University, concludes, “We shuffle from one (religion) to the other with little sense of what is being lost (or gained) in the process...(but) Something precious is being lost here, perhaps something as fundamental as a sense of the sacred.” He further comments, “Harvard philosopher George Santayana once observed that ‘American life is a powerful solvent capable of neutralizing new ideas into banal clichés.’ This solvent is now melting down the sharp edges of the world’s religions, bending them toward purposes other than their own...So

Furthermore, many spiritual-but-not-religious seekers pursue instruction from the personal insights and psychological truths of Eastern, Native American, and Chasidic texts and teachers. They are often found at a retreat center or browsing the New Age, meditation, recovery, magic, prophecy, inspiration, angelology, or spirituality sections of a local mega bookstore that used to collect all of the above in one section under the title, “Religion.”

Rev William McKinney, a past-president of the Pacific School of Religion, a United Church of Christ (UCC) seminary in Berkeley, California, referred to people whose religious needs are not being met as “unfed sheep.” His national church denomination is dealing with a below-replacement birthrate of 1.3 births per family as well as unusually high death rates (a demographic not dissimilar to that of other communities). Furthermore, many remaining loyal members of churches and synagogues can be categorized as “alimony” supporters who sustain their houses of worship and clergy but are unwilling to participate in their worship and activities. They engage in so few religious practices at home that houses of worship have become, in effect, homeless shelters—homes for individuals without religious homes. They expect clergy to be surrogate parents, the ones who do it all so that they can do nothing.

Instead of “brands” defined by communally organized bureaucratic religious structures, spiritual-but-not-religious seekers are looking for what Swiss psychologist Carl Jung termed synchronicity (the occurrence of “meaningful coincidence”), events so timely and moving that they are considered to be beyond mere chance, or what theologian Rudolph Otto termed numinosity (the irresistible, undeniable, unforgettable feeling of being in the presence of the Divine). In *Your Word is Fire: Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer*, authors Arthur Green and Barry Holtz capture this feature in ecstatic Chasidic prayer, defining such devotion as “being on fire and unifying with God.” The net effect is that such spiritual

seekers do not look to so-called “traditional” forms of religion and connection to clergy to find what they are seeking.

Fourth, in spite of growing waves of spirituality, belief in an active God is declining:

This age of scientific discovery and the wonders of technology demand hard proof that diminishes the faith that provides certainty when considering the role of God in their lives. Probably no one here made note of an obituary for Thomas J. J. Altizer who died a year ago (November 28, 2018), which is surprising because his theological orientation merited a stark April 8, 1966 *Time Magazine* cover in black with bold red letters that pointedly asks: “Is God Dead?” Now, all he earned in *Time Magazine* was a single column with a tiny reproduction of the 1966 cover. Dr. Altizer, who taught at Emory University, questioned whether a benevolent God could exist in light of World War II and the Holocaust. “This God is no longer present, is no longer manifest, is no longer real,” he said.

The 1966 *Time Magazine* story focused mostly on how science and secularism were supplanting religion. But in a country where 97 percent of adults back then said they believed in God, it touched off ferocious backlash against the magazine and led to the vilification Dr. Altizer, who was something of a showman. He was quickly ushered off the stage of the Merv Griffin Show after pandemonium broke out in the audience and was greeted at the stage door by demonstrators demanding his death. Altizer “was one of the country’s most hated, misunderstood, radical and prophetic voices of the past century,” said disciple theologian Jordan E. Miller.

Most religions have had their share of atheists, humanists, and secularists. Just ten years ago there was a resurgence of atheists. Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, concluded, “The God of the Old Testament is . . . a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, an infanticidal, genocidal . . . megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” and, he enumerated the crimes committed in God’s name: war, persecution of minorities, terrorism, closing of children’s minds, oppression of those with alternative sexual orientation. He concluded that religion’s disappearance would be an unmitigated good.

Likewise, Christopher Hitchens book, *Religion Poisons Everything*, holds that those who continue to believe in the unbelievable are morons, lunatics, or liars, and portrays creations as “yokels;” Islam as “a rather obvious and ill-arranged set of plagiarisms;” Hanukkah as a “vapid and annoying holiday;” and King David as an “unscrupulous bandit.” He says that terrorism is the result of

religion itself and not religious extremism because religion, by its very nature, educates believers to hate nonbelievers and encourages slaughter and conquest for God's greater glory, and thereby compels people to behave cruelly and violently. Thus, a world without religious faith would result in "no Arab-Israel conflict because religious belief not only aggravates such conflict but is "the explicit cause" of it. In short, he and others see no redeeming value in religion, unlike atheist Sigmund Freud who, despite his life-long devotion to the cause of atheism, held that taking God into one's mind immeasurably enriches an individual by advancing introspective intellectual efforts.

So, having painted a bleak picture of the decline in relationships with clergy and churches and synagogues, I wonder aloud if there are bright spots in contemporary religion and if it is possible for religion to be pulled back from the edge of the precipice.

1--When I delivered the commencement address at the University of San Francisco in 2013, I told the students:

I am a Jew in the pew, a rabbi delivering a commencement address at a leading Jesuit University. I feel a responsibility to urge you to consider not only the life of the mind but also the life of the spirit. Explore your faith as a source of strength for both the victories and the challenges you will face—the loss of a loved one, the commitment and sanctification of your relationship with your life partner, the birth of a child, the challenges of building careers—moments of exultation and moments of despair. To do so, you cannot be a stranger to your faith. Even if you are not a regular worshipper, establish a relationship with a clergyperson, figure out what it means to have a spiritual practice, be grateful for what you have, because as sacred Scripture notes, "We do not live by bread alone (Deut 8:3; Luke 4:4). You have mastered the care and feeding of your bodies and minds; now give careful thought to the nourishment of your souls. 2013

Given the increasing levels of loneliness and alienation, the blending of free time and work, and dissolution of traditional relationships already discussed, steeling oneself against life's slings and arrows in a society often adrift, citizens should be urged to find a mentor, teacher, trusted friend, and yes, a clergyperson to help them navigate the shoals of life.

2--I take a moment to speak in support of clergy officiants and houses of worship. There is far greater likelihood that a ceremony held in a church or

synagogue will elicit good judgment on the part of the officiant and appropriate behavior on the part of the wedding guests and provide the context for the creation of a genuinely spiritual event. Although destination weddings are in vogue, I do not consider a mountaintop or a beach or a winery to be a substitute for the majesty of a house of worship—no matter how grand or simple the building. Having my pastor, my priest, my rabbi, my imam as the officiant creates an aura of sanctity that is often missing when utilizing a mail-order clergy person.

3—Let me conclude on a note of optimism. Last Friday, Congregation Emanu-El celebrated the 20th anniversary of our young adult community with 800 in attendance. Twenty years ago, the clergy and staff made a concerted effort to draw young adults, 20s and 30s into the congregation, long before they married and had families and the need to affiliate. We invested heavily in programming, staffing, and clergy in order to lower the membership age that was then skewed to the over sixty population. In 1999, we began attracting sixty or so worshippers to what rapidly became 500, and then as many as 1000 worshippers at a once-a-month worship service geared to this population. Today, fully one-half of the congregation's membership is 39 and under. And many of those members are connecting with the clergy and inviting them to officiate at their weddings. The congregation has so many marriages from this community and so many babies being born that we have an annual blessing of the babies once a year—it is so energizing to see 80 to 100 newborns squirming, laughing and building a future in congregational life and with their clergy.

In summary, religion at its best calls upon us to rethink and remake traditions and practices based on knowledge of ancient and modern customs, even as we remake ourselves in a world in which the memory of ancient truths, often is lost. Left to our own devices, this task in a rapidly shifting religious landscape is the challenge of the day.

Thank you

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