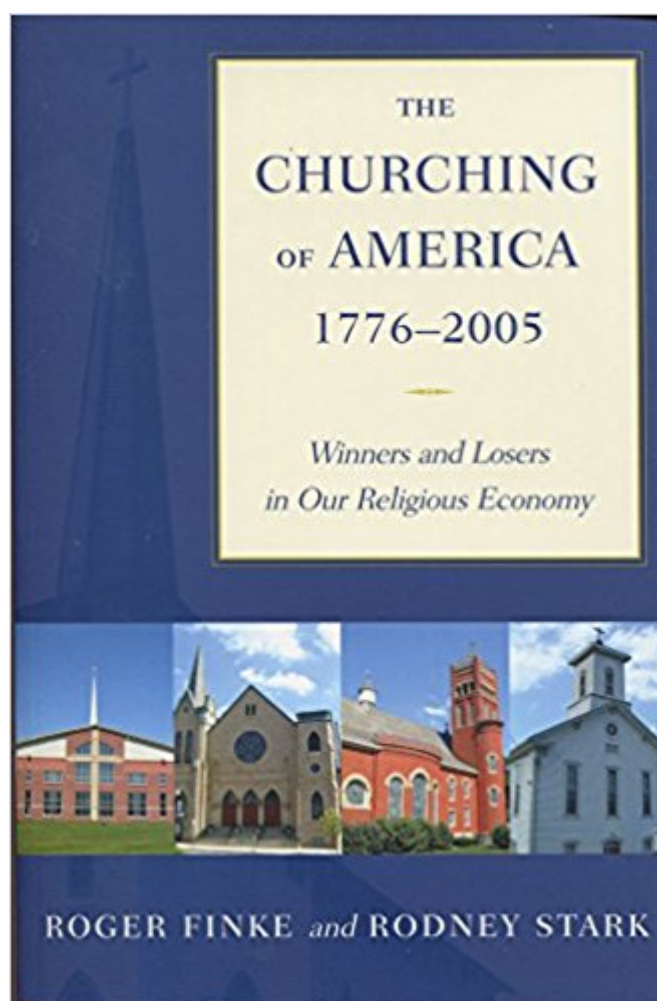


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The Churching Of America, 1776-2005: Winners And Losers In Our Religious Economy



Synopsis

In this provocative book, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark challenge popular perceptions about American religion. They view the religious environment as a free market economy, where churches compete for souls. The story they tell is one of gains for upstart sects and losses for mainline denominations. Although many Americans assume that religious participation has declined in America, Finke and Stark present a different picture. In 1776, fewer than 1 in 5 Americans were active in church affairs. Today, church membership includes about 6 out of 10 people. But, as Finke and Stark show, not all denominations benefited. They explain how and why the early nineteenth-century churches began their descent, while two newcomer sects, the Baptists and the Methodists, gained ground. They also analyze why the Methodists then began a long, downward slide, why the Baptists continued to succeed, how the Catholic Church met the competition of ardent Protestant missionaries, and why the Catholic commitment has declined since Vatican II. The authors also explain why ecumenical movements always fail. In short, Americans are not abandoning religion; they have been moving away from established denominations. A "church-sect process" is always under way, Finke and Stark argue, as successful churches lose their organizational vigor and are replaced by less worldly groups. Some observers assert that the rise in churching rates indicates increased participation, not increased belief. Finke and Stark challenge this as well. They find that those groups that have gained the greatest numbers have demanded that their followers accept traditional doctrines and otherworldliness. They argue that religious organizations can thrive only when they comfort souls and demand sacrifice. When theology becomes too logical, or too secular, it loses people. Â Â

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Customer Reviews

Roger Finke is a professor of sociology and religious studies at the Pennsylvania State University and serves as the director of the American Religion Data Archive. Rodney Stark was for many years professor of sociology and comparative religion at the University of Washington. In 2004 he became University Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University.

This is an update of later data from his first book on the same topic. I learned a lot from the first book and the second has not disappointed. Dr. Finke is one of my favorite researchers and authors on church growth, church health and how to assess denominational trends. He jumps over style to substance as the keys to getting and maintaining members. He punctures the self-serving rationalization of Mainline apologists for why they are dead or dying. I also appreciate his economic model for it clarifies and simplifies growth and reduction patterns. Despite a terrible title, the book is a mother lode of useful information for Pastors and Theologians as well as interested Laity.

Had to read this book for a class. It's actually a fascinating read that delves into American religiosity and explains how America has become more observant over the years, and why some churches are growing while others shrink. Quite readable and interesting for anyone with a broad curiosity about American religion.

No more mainline church propaganda about why denominations lose members. You either stay strong in your doctrine and God's word or you begin to become irrelevant to those seeking God because you have abandoned God and His Word. This book presents the facts without editorial content. You cannot miss the point.

Finke and Stark do an amazing job talking about the history of America and what helped found our nation. If you are looking for a great book about the history and religion of America and desire the perspective of sociologists you will love this book. They keep things interesting and on topic.

Great research and understanding of history as to how it relates to us today.

For years, Americans have been fed the story that religious belief in America is diminishing, as more citizens "drift away" from various churches toward secularism. The authors of this book, who examined thousands of church records and other documents from a more critical viewpoint, show this belief is false. The statistics, when evaluated objectively rather than through the typical "falling away from God" paranoia, show religious activity in the US has actually been rising since Colonial times. Data doesn't lie. While church membership was higher on paper during the Colonial period, this is only because Colonies and individual towns were managed directly through local churches. These churches collected taxes from all citizens. Therefore churches showed high "membership" rates since nearly all citizens were listed on their rolls. Anyone who paid taxes or fees for residency were counted as "members." Other, less objective researchers have missed this point, and claimed high membership meant a high level of religious fervor during the early Colonial period. This really wasn't the case. Remember, only 35 of the 105 Mayflower colonists were Puritans. The others were merchants, fishermen, trappers, and others who were simply traveling to America. Most histories don't note this. Why are Americans constantly bombarded by the idea that the US is becoming "less Christian" than it was before? Primarily it's because certain sects have lost members while others gained them. Some sects that were dominant in early America barely exist today. Another force is also at work here. Religious leaders love to portray the church as "oppressed" by evil secular forces. They'd rather appeal to followers' emotions and fears than admit that American churches are doing rather well. Doing so wouldn't give church leaders the opportunity to paint an "us vs. them" battle, or to insist that Christianity is under attack. Fincke & Stark have done a great service by conducting their statistical analysis of the reality of this situation. While church leaders will wail and gnash their teeth at the authors' conclusions, rational people may start to understand how the American public has been manipulated. That's a good thing.

If someone thinks that religion, in order to attract new believers, should be in harmony with this world, woe betides him, he seems to be wrong. The authors explain that for more than two centuries, in America, the religious denominations with better scores in rates of growth were those which were organized sect-like, i.e., maintained distance with the world by imposing heavy demands upon his flock (but also granting them great rewards). On the other side, those which tried and compromised, in order to relieve tensions and differences with their society (i.e., those church-like) have been steadily declining. Difference pays, assimilation and ecumenism leads to bankruptcy. Why? Read the book and you will find out, and although perhaps you will be somewhat shocked to see religion explained by often using economic terminology, do not worry, the book is

not irreverent. Besides, it is not a difficult read (only 300 pages) though it is not a light read either (content: 5 stars; pleasure: 4 to 3).P.S. For more information, I would also suggest reading the reviews of the first edition of this work ("The Churching of America, 1776-1990").

Love it!

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