

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Stephen Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-first Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 256 pp., \$US 19.00 paper (978-0-226-20490-1), \$US 48.00 hardcover (978-0-226-20489-5).

The title of this well written and insightful book is somewhat misleading: it is not about megachurches, nor is it really about mainline Christianity in the United States. It is a detailed study of nine Lutheran congregations in the San Francisco Bay Area, with a research question that initially sets out to discover why some congregations are flourishing, while there has been a pervasive loss of membership within California Lutheranism itself. In trying to answer this seemingly straightforward question, Ellingson's research develops into an amazing case study that challenges traditional sociology of religion theories, adding a very well developed critique of religion in the United States. Ellingson examines how the megachurch trend (and industry) and mainline Christianity affect a very traditional and conservative Christian denomination as it tries to negotiate a changing social environment in which competition for adherents has become unavoidable.

What makes Ellingson's study so valuable is its focus upon a traditional form of Christianity that has historically maintained clear boundaries concerning its religious identity and belief system. This boundary maintenance has often created tension within the movement itself, initially leading to divisions between "orthodoxists" and "pietists," and it has led to tension with the surrounding society. Ellingson provides enough history and background to set the stage for the contemporary transformations that are occurring, and being resisted, within the nine congregations he examined in California. The book provides a detailed and fascinating account of how the tradition attempts to maintain this rigid identity while they make these boundaries much more permeable to other forms and practices of Christianity, in the overall hope of increasing membership. Recognizing that the changes occurring in the Lutheran Church are much more complex than a single general theory can account for, Ellingson draws upon cultural, ecological, and market theories of religious change.

A key focus of the book is the “embeddedness” of the Lutheran religious tradition within the congregations. Although the nine congregations studied were in the same geographic area, each congregation had a particular relationship with unique religious worlds, and the way the tradition was maintained and embedded within the congregation influenced how they modified, maintained, or resisted alterations to their religious identity as Lutherans. Congregations couldn’t just transform their existing religious culture because they wanted to increase membership; their embeddedness with the tradition influenced their responses.

Ellingson provides an insightful social constructionist account of the religious transformations that he encountered in his research. He argues convincingly that the issues many congregations perceive as threats to their wellbeing are really endogenous forces for change, not external factors. The catalyst for change must be constructed within the congregation itself (as a crisis of meaning and membership), rather than just as a set of external factors affecting or influencing the church. Many of the issues and problems the congregations and their leadership articulated were potential problems. Yet interacting with “experts from the church growth industry” convinced many congregations that they were in crisis, which challenged them to adapt their tradition. By instituting changes recommended by Biblicist organizations, which included several of the nation’s flagship megachurches, conservative seminaries, and experts from mainline Protestant denominations, these congregations began altering their tradition while simultaneously trying to articulate and maintain what it meant to be a Lutheran. In some cases, these adaptations led to membership decline and even charges of heresy against a church minister.

Ellingson’s work is a rich analysis of nine very detailed case studies. The book is well written, and it sheds light on the transformations underway within the religious environment in the United States. The critique of contemporary sociological theories of religion that deal with religious change is especially appealing. He argues that religious traditions are in a constant state of flux, affected by everything from issues of authority and the state, to modernism and theories of evolution, to postmodernism and a religious marketplace. He shows that to grasp changes in the current religious environment, we must better understand how traditions perceive, interpret, and respond to their social situation. How they choose to change, why they make the choices they make, and how they negotiate and implement these changes among their faithful are the questions that must be addressed in greater detail to really understand religion in our contemporary society.

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