

Research Paper

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Economic, Social, and Political Phenomena Contributing to the American Megachurch

Introduction

When American megachurches are brought up in conversation, typically the mind conjures memories of viral videos showing pastors harnessed to mechanisms in grand church stadiums, levitating through the masses while spouting biblical preaching - at least, that's where my mind goes. While videos of this may be entertaining, if somewhat baffling, to the ordinary onlooker, these organizations also provide much opportunity to understand the broader phenomena occurring in American society at large, and to study the correlation of economic, social, and political phenomena that has led so many Americans to worship within an institution such as the megachurch. The spectacle of the American megachurch, defined specifically as a Protestant congregation of 2,000 or more (Thumma and Bird 2014), rose to prominence in the 1970s alongside other mega-sized phenomena in the States such as the megamall and the rising popularity of ultra consumerism as a function of the American dream (Eagle 2019). Increasingly megachurches, and correspondingly their pastors, have become somewhat of a sensation in the shared American consciousness, gathering excessive levels of wealth and prominence. In my investigation I aim to uncover whether changes and instability in American society have contributed to the rise of the contemporary megachurch phenomena. I want to clarify whether the rise in popularity of these organizations can be correlated with rapid societal change occurring within American society. My interest in the subject has prompted me to ask the following question: what are the economic, social, and political conditions that have contributed to the prominence of megachurches in the United States today? In my paper I will seek out data that will illustrate the increased prevalence of megachurches in the United States in recent years, and

highlight how certain social, economic, and political issues have contributed to the increase in power and wealth held by megachurches, and correspondingly their pastors. Using the case study of Houston's Lakewood Church, I will seek out correlative data that will illustrate this church's rise to prevalence in American society, selecting a number of relevant issues that correspond to an increase in their congregation numbers. Notable charismatic leaders of the past capitalized on the societal issues of their times, and today others are doing the same thing. This is a significant topic to explore because it is vital to understand the greater forces that can lead people to flock towards certain phenomena, organizations, or communities during times of instability or even crisis, and to better recognize the issue of leaders with extreme wealth perpetuating class inequality through squeezing money out of their congregation to fund their own lavish personal lives.

History

Throughout history, charismatic leaders have taken advantage of tumultuous and uncertain times within society in order to gain a place within the spotlight, and therefore power, influence, and personal wealth. For example, Shoko Asahara of Aum Shinrikyo capitalized on Japan's process of cultural rebuilding after WWII, with many Japanese in search of religion and faith in the 1980s (Raevskiy 2014). Jim Jones of the People's Temple capitalized on the American civil rights movement by working on creating desegregated spaces. A large proportion of individuals that participated in his congregation were those who were both vulnerable and socially marginalized and who were drawn to a diverse and accepting community during a time of great social and political discontent in the United States over the issue of civil rights, equality, and integration (Leedolphus Griffin 2013). A comparison can be drawn from these leaders to that

of the megachurch pastor, often reported by the media as living in million dollar mansions (Bowen and Evans 2022), flying in private jets (Brice-Saddler 2019), and wearing expensive designer clothing (Bailey 2021).

According to *The Handbook of Megachurches*, the structure of megachurches is nothing new, with history tracing back to the Protestant Reformation (Eagle 2019). Eagle outlines that the structure of the megachurch is a result of the functional urge of the Protestant denomination working to reach as many individuals as possible. The Protestants created their churches with secular activities in mind as well, working towards creating buildings in which the community can gather at any time, not just for religious reasons (Eagle 2019). However, the megachurches of today have evolved immensely from their beginnings.

Contemporary American megachurches are a controversial phenomena, much in part to megachurch pastors publicly gaining and flaunting excessive wealth. Following media coverage on American megachurches, it seems they are corporate institutions with the intention of gathering as much money as they can from those that attend their services, which seems antithetical to the core values and teachings of Christianity, such as humility and generosity (Christian Bible Reference Site 2019). However, megachurches appear to thrive in contemporary American society, gathering thousands upon thousands of devoted attendees.

Discussion

In this essay I will discuss three periods of time in the US where megachurches saw great increases in congregation numbers, and highlight a number of the economic, social, and political issues that occurred in tandem with this increase in attendance. Many of these issues inspired widespread feelings that the world was becoming increasingly amoral, that individuals had no

control over their own lives and fates, and feelings of isolation and disconnect from greater society. I aim to explain why these widespread feelings acted as a catalyst that set American society up for a climate in which the megachurch as an institution thrived.

1970s

The 1970s were characterized by many fraught economic, social, and political issues such as the Cold War, the Vietnam war and the corresponding anti-war movement, and Watergate. In the early 1970s, televangelist programs were rising to prominence as well, fueling the religious trend towards spreading the word further and reaching a far broader audience. At the same time, megachurches were experiencing their first emergence into American society.

American Megachurches as we know them today emerged in the 1970s during the introduction of the mega-phenomena in the US, such as the megamall. This was a time in American economics characterized by super-sizing institutions and the increase in ultra-consumerism (Eagle 2019). The rise of the mega-phenomena relates to Weber's model of the Protestant ethic, the basis of which is the fact that a central aspect of Protestant belief is that one's fate is predetermined, meaning that God has chosen whether or not a person will be going to Heaven once they die and there is nothing an individual can do to change that fact. Weber posited that, within capitalist modernity, Protestants believed that the accumulation of material wealth was a sign from God of membership of the elect and argued that this rationale was necessary in nurturing the spirit of capitalism (Weber 1904). In analyzing the trend towards ultra-consumerism in the 1970s through the lens of Weber's theory on the Protestant ethic, it makes sense that megachurches began receiving their first wave of membership during an increase in American consumption. Ultra-consumerism aligns with the model of the megachurch

in that they are fundamentally consumerist institutions, with pastors encouraging material wealth through modeling lavish lifestyles, and through preaching the prosperity gospel, the message that if an individual donates generously to their church God will reward them with a prosperous life (Wrenn 2020). So, members have great incentive to donate to their church because if they do, they will be rewarded with economic prosperity. In sum, megachurches function as one of the aspects of American society that encourages and actively pursues the consumptive habits of the American dream, which is the shared goal of freedom to pursue upward mobility and individual financial success (Hauhart and Sardoc 2022).

The American megachurch emerged alongside quintessential aspects of what many associate with the United States, one of the most notable being suburbia. The rise of suburbia in the United States is complex and multidimensional and emerged before that of the megachurch. According to Joo, the rise in popularity of the suburbs can be attributed to the urge to promote “the supremacy of the ‘American way of life’”(Joo 2009), among other “socio-cultural developments of the the post-World War II America such as conspicuous consumption [...] and a tendency toward [...] economic exclusiveness”(Joo 2009). While there are urban megachurches, a majority in the US are situated in suburban contexts (Carney 2012). Suburbia, with its “nonthreatening architecture”(Carney 2012) provides a level of security and standardization that many were seeking out during this period. While the suburbs first began to appear in the US in the 1950s, there was still a large population transition from rural to urban to suburban contexts in the 1970s (Eagle 2019). Megachurches play into societal trends in order to be more appealing to the public (Carney 2012) and therefore play into the individualistic and consumptive model of suburbia by preaching and emulating prosperity and material wealth.

Early 2000s

The early 2000s were a turbulent time that led to general instability in American society and set America up for increasingly polarized future decades. Beginning with Y2K and 9/11, then the 2008 economic crisis, and the H1N1 influenza of 2009 and 2010, the millennium had a rocky start.

The attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 shook America to its core and kicked off a social environment that consisted of a fear of diversity, Islamophobia, and a general feeling of instability within society (Hartig and Doherty 2021). It inspired a distrust in religious pluralism among many Americans and a feeling that multiplicity of religion was a grave threat to the security and stability of the nation (Eck 2014). Many Americans flocked to religious hubs in reaction to the event in search of spiritual guidance and community (Hartig and Doherty 2021).

The significance and lasting impact of the 2008 economic crisis cannot be understated. This was a tragic event that began with a housing boom due to sham mortgages, and ended in thousands of Americans losing their houses, life savings, and jobs (Singh 2023). The aftereffects of the 2008 economic crisis arguably are felt to this day. Not only did it result in the loss of homes and individual wealth, it triggered a huge distrust in both the American government and the institutions put in place to manage the finances of US citizens. People began searching for an alternative institution in which they could put their trust in and would guide them out of hardship. While there is little research on the impacts of economic crises on levels of religiosity, Storm points out that “religious people are more likely to feel economically secure regardless of

their income levels”(Storm 2017), pointing to the fact that individuals may turn to religion in times of economic crisis.

The early 2000s were also characterized by the rise of the internet, leading to a revolution in communication and the spread of information that was unprecedented. While the world wide web was established in 1989 (CERN 2019), the internet started to gain greater traction around the establishment of popular social media sites such as Facebook in 2004 (Devarakonda 2022), and Twitter in 2006 (Hetler 2023). On the surface it appears that this revolution in connection allowed megachurches to spread the word to a broader audience than ever before, and that there is a distinct and significant connection between the rise of the internet and American megachurches. However, subsequent research could be performed in this area to further explore this correlation.

While it is difficult to obtain statistical information on megachurches from before the 2000s, a 2000 study performed on 600 American megachurches by Scott Thuma states megachurch attendance increased “by an average rate of 90 percent” from 1980-2000 (Thumma 2000). By 2007, the Hartford Institute reported that there were approximately 1,300 megachurches in the country (Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2007). In summation, I draw a conclusion that the tumultuous circumstances of the early 2000s, as well as the emergence of the internet, contributed to the rise in American megachurches during this time.

Trump’s America

No one can argue with the statement that the last eight years have been turbulent, both globally and in the United States. The presidential election of Donald Trump in 2016 was an

event that was all at once economic, social, and political, and shook America (and the world) to its core. Importantly, Trump models himself as a religious practitioner and incorporates his faith, as well as his right wing ideology, into his campaign and his approach to issues such as abortion, immigration, and religious freedom. Megachurches are generally aligned with much of Trump's message, typically being right wing, conservative institutions themselves (Gaskins and Jacobs 2022). Trump's America became characterized by an increase in vocal right-wing ideology, and megachurches became yet another space in which these views were reflected and further community could be created around the prevalent ideologies of the time period. In *Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations*, Campbell et al. argue that the increasing influence of traditionalist Christian values in conservative politics has led to Americans either abandoning their religious associations or becoming more religiously devout based on their partisan tendencies (Campbell et al. 2018). Trump's election, based heavily around conservative religious values, created a more polarized America in which people were deciding upon their religious orientations based on their political orientations. This meant that, if someone voted republican in the 2016 election, they were more likely to begin to associate with conservative Christian ideals, something that can be found in the megachurch setting. Trump's election created an environment in America in which Megachurches could reflect the seemingly dominant, or at least strongly vocal, persuasion of the broader American society, and therefore become attractive to those who were involved in the politics of the time.

Trump also models a lavish and expensive lifestyle, similar to many megachurch pastors. As an influential figure in American society for many, this persuasion towards material wealth has likely turned Trump's followers closer to the ideals of consumerist living.

The Hartford Institute reports that approximately 1,700 megachurches exist in the United States today (Hartford Institute for Religious Research 2024), continuing the upwards trend in congregation numbers since the 1970s.

Lakewood Church

Lakewood church is the third largest megachurch in the United States, established in 1959 by John Osteen, a preacher who quickly became a well-known televangelist and author (Lakewood Church 2001). The 1970s saw great growth for Lakewood church. In 1972 the congregation totalled at 500 people, and by 1979 the congregation had risen to 5,000 (Sinitiere 2011). It is clear that this time garnered significant followership. It follows that the economic attitude of the US in the 1970s lent itself to the increase in those who aligned with the institution of the megachurch, an institution that found itself aligned with the rising consumerist ideals at the time.

In 1999, John's son Joel took over as the Senior Pastor at Lakewood after John's passing. At this time, Lakewood was situated in a building with a capacity of 7,800, but soon would require an even bigger home to accommodate the ever-rising number of followers. I was unable to find records of congregation size in 1999, however Lakewood's congregation numbered at approximately 8,000 in 2000 (Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2000). In 2005, the church purchased, renovated, and moved into a stadium-turned-church that seats up to 16,000 people.

Today, estimates of Lakewood's congregation size range from 45,000 (Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2024) to 50,000 (Sinitiere 2011) each week. Osteen is known to preach on topics such as self improvement, positive thinking, and the idea that belief in God can change

one's circumstances. Osteen also preaches the prosperity gospel. His messages speak loudly to those who feel as if they do not have control over their lives and who need a voice to tell them that everything will be alright, that God has a plan for them, an appealing message to individuals living in a society that they feel is unstable. A shifting reality can be a stressful one, but Osteen's preaching focuses on the spirit of hope in difficult times (Lakewood Church 2024).

Conclusion

The reasons a megachurch can be so appealing during societal circumstances such as the ones outlined in this paper are numerous, however through my research I have come to find that there are three main draws to the megachurch institution. To begin, megachurches offer authority that isn't the government, providing a sense of moral direction in a world that can feel as if it is traveling down an increasingly amoral path. Additionally, attending and participating in megachurch rituals can provide a sense of control over one's personal life, especially through the prosperity gospel. Those that contribute funds to the church are told by their pastors that because of their good deeds, they will prosper in life. Finally, megachurches provide a low commitment religious community that can provide a sense of stability, togetherness, cohesion, and solidarity in uncertain times.

Through following the path of the American megachurch, it can be seen that many significant economic, social, and political events have led to great instability within American society and, alongside that, have seen a notable increase in megachurch popularity. Through exploration of the question: what are the economic, social, and political conditions that have ultimately led to the prominence of megachurches in the US today?, we can better understand

some of the societal circumstances and phenomena that have led to the prominence of the megachurch in the United States.

In the 1970s, the culture shift towards ultra-consumerism aligned with the structure of the megachurch, and analyzing the emergence of the American megachurch through the lens of Weber's Protestant ethic helps us understand the correlation between the drive towards material wealth and religious alignment. Additionally, the trend towards suburbia at the time went hand-in-hand with the emergence of megachurches, which are widely understood to be suburban phenomena.

In the early 2000s, the United States faced a number of unprecedented issues, which led to a general instability within society and a widespread urge to find an institution in which people could put their trust in, as the American government, financial institutions, and society in general seemed to be crumbling in on itself. Additionally, the rise of the internet allowed for megachurches to spread their gospel to a far broader audience.

More recently, the prominence of Trumpism in the United States has led to an increase in polarization and, correspondingly, religious affiliation on the right side of the political spectrum. Ultimately, the path to the American megachurch has been characterized by societal change and unrest, thriving in conditions that have led numerous individuals to seek out faith communities to support them through instability while maintaining, and preaching, American values such as consumerism and political conservatism.

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