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0521803969 - The Resilience of Conservative Religion: The Case of Popular, Conservative Protestant Congregations

Joseph B. Tamney

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THE RESILIENCE OF CONSERVATIVE RELIGION

The resurgence and persistent appeal of conservative religion – not just in the United States, but around the world in the past few decades – present a great challenge to sociologists and to modernization theory. The recent growth and popularity of conservative churches contradict the idea that late-modern societies – with their emphases on the individual, the separation of church and state, and the cultural fragmentation and secularization that they foster – have outgrown the need for such relics of the past as traditionalist religions. In this book, Joseph Tamney offers an explanation for this apparent incongruity by looking at the case of growing, popular, conservative Protestant congregations in the United States.

From about 1972 through the late 1980s, more Americans switched from mainline Protestant churches to conservative Protestant churches than the reverse, and the trend continues. Tamney uses four cases studies of successful Protestant congregations in middle America to examine why people join conservative churches and what people like about them. He uses these cases – three that represent diverse strands of conservative Protestantism and one that represents a mainline church – to test the relevance of Dean Kelley's "strong church" theory, which posits that strictness accounts for the appeal and resilience of conservative religion. Tamney finds that while strictness holds some appeal, the most successful churches are not really traditionalist at all, but what he calls "modernized traditionalist." These conservative congregations survive and continue to attract members because they both accommodate secular changes and compensate for the failures of late-modern society. They are able to maintain the appealing stance of being "against the world," without in fact being isolationist.

This book is filled with enlightening interviews with church members and data gleaned from participant observation; it offers both ethnographic and theoretical contributions. Tamney's findings represent a synthesis of ideas from supporters of secularization theory and from those who stress the competitive market of churches in America as a factor in church growth. Tamney's conclusion, that the most popular conservative churches in practice accommodate modern society, is more consistent with modernization theory than Kelley's explanation, which emphasizes the appeal of the conservative church as a strictly traditional, unchanging, self-sufficient, and absolutist social unit. Tamney offers a new, alternative way to look at the phenomenon of conservative churches in the modern age – one that may be applied more broadly to explain the appeal and survival of conservative religion and congregations in other parts of the world.

JOSEPH B. TAMNEY is Professor of Sociology at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. His previous books include *The Resilience of Christianity in the Modern World* (1992), *American Society in the Buddhist Mirror* (1992), and *The Struggle over Singapore's Soul* (1996). Professor Tamney was the editor of *Sociology of Religion* from 1995–2000. He has published articles in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Sociology of Religion*, *Review of Religious Research*, *Journal of Church and State*, *British Journal of Sociology*, and *Sociological Forum*.

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