

GOLDEN RULE CHRISTIANS

Prepared By: Dr. Michael McCallion
Department of Parish Life / Pastoral Resources (313-237-5760)

The various findings reported below are taken from:

Ammerman, Nancy. "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream."
In Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice. 1997. Edited by David
D. Hall. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

She argues, like the others, that religious persons need to be defined more by their "practices" not their ideologies - right living over right believing. And for Golden Rule Christians it is about "doing good and caring for others." Golden Rule Christians do not have the biblical vocabulary of other Christians, like evangelicals, but they nevertheless are influenced by their faith. She argues that what she is describing as Golden Rule Christians may just well be the dominant form of religiosity among middle-class suburban Americans. She notes that urban congregations were more likely to be activist and evangelicals were located in both urban and suburban settings.

They are not primarily white, nor can this orientation be defined by age or gender. It is not necessarily a baby boom style of religion. Even among Catholics, they do not know the finer points of the catechism but they do have a guiding moral philosophy by which they live.

She actually talks about three types of Christians and she says that activists are slightly more liberal than Golden Rule Christians (GRC) and evangelicals are a good deal more conservative. And like the rest of their life, GRC are defined more by choices and practice than by doctrine. GRC are not about developing a coherent theological system nor are they concerned to do so. Even the notion of "salvation is a bit fuzzy in their minds." Meaning does not consist of cognitive or ideological structures but in practices that cohere into something the person can call a "good life." She notes that McKinney refers to this group of people as believers in the "cult of the good person."

GRCs, for the most part, have gone to college and have incomes of 50,000 dollars or more. Evangelicals have less college and average about 40,000 dollars a year. GRCs are people with the social resources for making their own choices rather than following a single orthodoxy or narrow institutional commitment.

Above all, GRC care for relationships, doing good deeds, and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for people in need. Their goal is neither to change people's beliefs or the political system. The relationship that defines them the most though is that of parent to child. They want to bring their children up in somekind of faith. Throughout history this has been a concern, the protection of children and the good graces of the church for their children - even when they are not enthusiastic believers. In fact, she notes this as a paradox in that they want religious education for their children but that their lack of enthusiasm and sometimes participation can inhibit GRCs from passing on the faith to their children. But this religious training they see as part of their obligation to the world.

“The emphasis on caring relationships tends to mean a certain narrowness in the circle of care occupied by Golden Rule Christians. Such a level of intense commitment could not be maintained over a wide domain. It is focused primarily on family, friends, neighborhood, and church. It is in Stephen Warner’s terms, parochial, but an “elective parochialism,” chosen rather than ascribed. In some cases, there may be a certain defensiveness in its narrowness, an attempt at protection from threatening “others” who occupy the rest of the urban landscape. In other instances, it may more properly be seen as an attempt to *create a community in which mobile people can be rooted*. It is a narrow circle, but it is characterized by genuine engagement and caring. Unlike the moral minimalism M.P. Baumgartner ascribes to suburbia, these Golden Rule Christians have carved out a space in which the indifference of the suburbs is limited, in which both caring and conflict are possible because the bonds of community are being tended more attentively than those in the large suburban milieu.” (P. 205).

GRCs have not given up on transcendence, however, and therefore are still rightly considered religious and christian, not just humanists or do gooders. Also, three things are essential to them. 1. Opportunities to serve people in need, 2. Dynamic worship, 3. And attractive activities for children. “Over and over, when we asked people why they chose a given church, they said they were looking for a place that would be good for their children.”

“The congregations they prefer, then, are likely to be shaped by the need for reflective time, as well as by an emphasis on child-rearing and community service. Congregations are not the only social institution to which GRCs belong. These people are likely to have many allegiances and friendships outside their particular congregations, but that does not necessarily mean that their religiosity is constrained to a small slice of life. On the contrary, much of their everyday activity is shaped by Golden Rule religious practices, and those practices are grounded in the stories of Scripture and the experiences of worship and transcendence. If we begin to recognize the dimensions of this Golden Rule mode of religiosity, we may also begin to recognize the ways in which modern religion has more pervasive effects than we might have thought.”