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Religion Isn't What It Used To Be
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More often than not in the United States today, people expect religion to benefit human beings. And the benefits we expect from religion lie not just in the hereafter, but in the here and now.

In the last several decades, religion has become even more subject to humane standards. We look to religion to make us feel better, more satisfied, more whole, more spiritual. We assume it will make us better people -- kinder, more compassionate, more just and responsive. Gone are the days when religion exerted its power by constantly inducing feelings of guilt and shame. Who wants that today? Who has time for that today?

The bad news here for religion is that, in some respects at least, it has become less powerful. The emotional force of religion has, to some extent, been tamed. Its control over the human heart has been constrained.

In becoming gentler and more humane, religion has lost some of its power to admonish, humiliate, and convict of wickedness and wrongdoing. The fire and brimstone has cooled down, especially when it comes to what we think we deserve. The transcendent authority of religion has been diminished.

On the other hand, terror and humiliation may not be the most effective ways to induce personal transformation and good will toward all. If we have lost some respect for transcendent authority, the benefits may well be worth it.

The good news is that religious Americans have become more respectful of one another than ever before. Barriers separating religious groups from one another have shrunk, crossovers and borrowings are more common,

interfaith cooperation is easier. Shared expectations for religion as a contributor to human flourishing make strategic efforts to feed the hungry, attend to suffering, and influence public policy more frequent and effective.

For religious loyalists, there's even more good news. If the powerful forces of religion have been somewhat tamed and more strategically directed, there is little chance of their disappearing. The tendency to be religious is so universal, and so bound up with the fundamental workings of human nature, that better understanding and more effective channeling of religion is not likely to erode its deep rootedness in the human psyche.

The human tendency to be religious seems to be embedded in our biological nature. This means religion has contributed, over the long haul, to human survival. In light of this beneficial aspect of religion, becoming more strategic and self-conscious about religion's contribution to human flourishing can only amplify the instincts of our ancestors.

Amanda Porterfield's new book, "The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a New Awakening in the Late-Twentieth Century," is available at www.oup-usa.org and also is available through many booksellers.