

Trends in Religiosity and Religious Affiliation

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Abstract

This essay examines studies of trends in religion and religiosity, concentrating on the case of the United States but periodically comparing that country to other societies as well.

The summary of research opens with an overview of the putative wisdom received from the once-dominant belief in the process of secularization. It proceeds to a consideration of American habits of religious affiliation and switching, followed by a discussion of rates of participation in religious activities (most notably, the reported reductions across denominations in attendance at church services over the past half-century). Featured next are recognition of the rising proportions of people who claim no religious preference at all and of those who adhere to a world faith other than Judaism or Christianity.

Finally, the narrative ventures several informed predictions concerning the contours of religion's future and concludes by identifying some of the theoretical and methodological challenges that any disciplinary or interdisciplinary understanding of religion will confront in a changed and changing world.

INTRODUCTION

For much of the past two centuries, social thinkers and theorists approached ideas about the relationship between religion and society through the prism of the process of secularization. In the broadest use of this term, writers in the social sciences ordinarily have meant the steady and inexorable decline of religion as a force both in collective institutions and in the lives of individuals. Religious trends, therefore, were expected to follow a path of linear descent as societies progressed and modernity wrapped its reach around the globe.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

SECULARIZATION AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE

In its simplest form, the secularization thesis implies “that there has been an enormously significant *change* in the ways in which society and religion have

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interacted in the past from the ways they do now” (Swatos & Christiano, 1999, p. 213; emphasis in the original). Major social transformations—the march from feudalism as a socioeconomic system to capitalism, the shift from agricultural to industrial production and the accompanying movement from rural to urban residence, the introduction of dissenting theologies and the decay of state-church monopolies, the change from folk tradition as a basis for knowledge and technique to the application of scientific rationality, and the substitution of bureaucratic organization for face-to-face interaction—were all thought to have reduced the viability of religion as a source of deep personal meaning and effective social control (Clark, 2012, pp. 174–186; Swatos & Christiano, 1999, pp. 214–215).

Yet, as decades of debate and study have demonstrated, the empirical evidence for this proposition in many parts of the world is ambiguous where it is not simply absent. As the British historian Clark (2012, p. 182) has observed, “Religious practice changed greatly in the twentieth century, as it has changed in every century, and these changes are historically important.” Yet, he added, “it is highly problematic to argue from that evidence to an underlying change in religiosity.” Certainly what he has written applies to the American case: Chaves and Anderson (2012, p. 212) bear witness to the obvious when they write that “High levels of religious belief and practice have characterized American society from its beginnings.” Indeed, if secularization is the destination that awaits all modernized societies, the United States has been uniquely tardy in getting there.

Statistical support for this proposition is abundant. For example, each and every Gallup Poll that has asked the question since 1976 has yielded the finding that more than 90% of American adults believe in “God or a universal spirit” (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 173). Further, between the 1970s and the 1990s, the percentage of the American public that asserted a belief in an afterlife increased steeply. This proportion rose specifically among Catholics and Jews: the former went from 74% agreement with life after death to 83% (roughly the same rate as Protestants), whereas for the latter, the climb was from a small minority, 19%, to a majority, 56%. Over the quarter-century, people with no religious preference also increased their rate of belief, from 44% to 63% (Greeley & Hout, 1999, pp. 814–815).

Moreover, the picture of most religion in the United States is remarkably static over time; most measures remain robust and exhibit few signs of wholesale deterioration. What change as can be documented since the middle of the twentieth century is ordinarily “slow-moving—even glacial” (Chaves, 2011, p. 2).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND SWITCHING

At the turn of the twenty-first century, various surveys of the American public agreed for the most part on the varied shape of the nation's religious landscape: slightly more than one-half of adults in the United States identified with one or another Protestant church, about one-quarter indicated to pollsters that they were Catholics, followers of other faiths accounted for less than one-tenth of the total, and between one-in-eight and one-in-six respondents expressed no religious affiliation at all (Schwadel, 2010, p. 311; Skirbekk, Kaufmann, & Goujon, 2010, pp. 295–296; Smith & Kim, 2005, pp. 214–215).

In the 30 years between 1972 and 2002, the Protestant proportion of the American population had dipped more than 10 percentage points; Catholics were off only two points, whereas the Jewish rate was halved, from 3% to 1.5%. At the same time, those who answered with “no religion” and “other religion” more than doubled their presences (Chaves, 2011, pp. 23–24; Hout & Fischer, 2002, pp. 166 and 188). The unaffiliated rose from 5.1% in 1972 to 13.8% in 2002 to 17% in 2008, at the same time that the constituencies for “other” faiths went from 1.9% to 6.9% of total adults. Fully 27% of those respondents who were born since 1980 said that they had no religious preference; more than 13% had been raised without any such influence (Chaves, 2011, p. 19; Hadaway & Marler, 1993, pp. 100–104; Schwadel, 2010, pp. 314–319; Sherkat, 2001, p. 1472; Smith & Kim, 2005, pp. 215–216). Indeed, Sherkat (2001, p. 1471) has written that “in recent decade of the twentieth century more Americans reported growing up with no religious affiliation than were raised in Judaism, or as Episcopalians.”

A minor cause of the growth or decline of religious groups is the “switcher”: someone who, over the course of a lifetime, moves from one category of denominational affiliation to another—or from religion to nonreligion, or the reverse. In the United States, a constitutional guarantee of religious freedom means that such “mobility” is “not uncommon” (Sherkat, 2001, p. 1459). True, in the 25 years from 1973 to 1998, from 60% to 70% of Americans persisted in the same religious affiliation; that is, the faith (or nonfaith) in which they were raised is the one that they professed consistently. However, about one-third of people in the United States shift from one group to another at some point in their lives (Sherkat, 2001, p. 1467).

Switches between denominations often occur immediately before or after marriage to a spouse of a different religious affiliation (Hadaway & Marler, 1993, pp. 99 and 108; Iannaccone, 1990, p. 302; Musick & Wilson, 1995; Sherkat, 2001, p. 1489 [Note 4]). However, when people do switch, the change is most often from one religious identity to another that is closely

related—theologically, socially, or historically (Musick & Wilson, 1995, p. 262; Sherkat, 2001, p. 1485). Travel up and down the religious spectrum, then, is usually a short trip along a familiar trail and not a long trek into an unknown wilderness.

Part of the reason for the tendency of the denominationally mobile not to stray too far from their points of religious origin lies in their accumulation, earlier in life, of what has been termed *religious human capital* (Iannaccone, 1990, p. 299). Having learned adequately and practiced proficiently the rudiments of one religious tradition, switchers seem reluctant to jettison all of that experience, a “sunk cost” of time and energy, to adopt an entirely novel identity. Rather, they gravitate toward a new affiliation that contains some (or many) of the same (or similar) elements of belief and practice as the option that they recently left behind (Iannaccone, 1990; compare Sherkat, 2001).

It follows from this reasoning also that “distinctive,” “quasi-ethnic” religious groups (such as Catholics, Jews, Lutherans, and Mormons) retain more of their original members because the religious capital that they impart is both considerable and not easily portable (Iannaccone, 1990; Sherkat, 2001). For instance, when presented with the prospect of marriage to a member of a different denomination, Catholics tend to gain through the switches of their would-be spouses rather than to lose through conversions to the faiths of their partners; indeed, when Catholics do shift at marriage, it is frequently out of organized religion altogether (Musick & Wilson, 1995, pp. 261–268).

“Persons who were reared Catholic,” note Hadaway and Marler (1993, p. 100), “tend to remain Catholic, and Catholics are still among the most stable of denominational families. Nevertheless,” they observe, “Catholic stability has eroded.” In recent years, Catholics have been particularly prone to losses from switching, with many Hispanic Catholics seeking membership in Pentecostal or fundamentalist Protestant sects and about an equal proportion of their white coreligionists seeking out mainstream Protestantism, non-Christian traditions, or disaffiliation from religion entirely (Hadaway & Marler, 1993, pp. 100–104; Scheitle, Kane, & Van Hook, 2011, p. 473). According to the General Social Survey, early in the twenty-first century about one out of every six persons who belonged to the Catholic Church at age 16 was no longer maintaining that identity (Sherkat, 2001, pp. 1469–1473; Skirbekk *et al.*, 2010, p. 300).

Despite the amount of switching between denominations that takes place in American society, an even more potent force in the growth of various religious groups is demographic. After all, the surest (if not the quickest) means of augmenting the ranks of any group is to prod it to make its own members and then strive to keep them within the fold. (As Sherkat [2001, p. 1485] has commented of conservative religious groups, “Sects are not so much attractive for switchers as they are retentive of members ...”) Research

has established that persons who are members of theologically conservative churches marry at younger ages, stay married longer, have more children, and keep those offspring within the church more successfully than do members of more liberal bodies (Hout, Greeley, & Wilde, 2001; Roof & McKinney, 1987; compare Scheitle *et al.*, 2011; Thomas & Olson, 2010).

RATES OF RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

A prime illustration of religion's "glacial" pace of change in the United States is the chart of church attendance rates by year. There exists some evidence that rates are not as high today as in the 1950s. Yet, "However one reads the evidence about trends between World War II and 1990," estimate Stanley Presser and Mark Chaves, "the recent past has been a time of stability," in that, they write, "weekly attendance at religious services has been stable since 1990." Thus, the two broadly concur with the judgment that "religious service attendance in the United States has been essentially constant throughout the second half of the twentieth century" (Presser & Chaves, 2007, p. 417). Simultaneously, north of the border in Canada, something different has been happening: proportions of worshipers who attended church at least monthly declined measurably between 1986 and 2008 (Eagle, 2011).

For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, from 41% to 46% of Americans who belonged to Protestant denominations contended that they had gone to church in the previous 7 days; the comparable rate for American Catholics was about 50% (Chaves, 1989, p. 465; Hadaway, Marler, & Chaves, 1993, p. 741 [Note 2]). The essential stability in these statistics to the present day can be explained by the dual effects of an aging population (which produces a more devoted pattern of attendance) and the replacement of older cohorts by younger ones (which depresses attendance rates). In aggregate, these influences work to cancel out each other (Chaves, 1989, pp. 475–476). All the same, a deterioration in church attendance by Americans has been detected and documented, but only for a single group (Roman Catholics) and for one period (from the late 1960s to the middle 1970s), when weekly Mass attendance for Catholics dipped sharply (Hout & Greeley, 1987, pp. 325–326, 328, and 341). Hout and Greeley (1987, pp. 332–335 and 340–342) associate this change with a one-time event: the sweeping erosion in confidence among Catholics about the teachings of their church's hierarchy dealing with sexuality in the wake of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968).

As elevated or diminished as present rates of church attendance in North American societies may be, evidence suggests that current reports actually overstate the true frequency of participation in religious services. Research

that compared projections of total attendance from survey data with estimates (Hadaway *et al.*, 1993) and with physical counts (Marler & Hadaway, 1999) of persons in congregations has revealed that the true rates of church attendance “are approximately *one-half* the generally accepted levels” (Hadaway *et al.*, 1993, p. 742; emphasis in the original; see also Chaves, 2011, pp. 42–45). For instance, in one rural county in Ohio, 36% of Protestant survey respondents said that they had attended church in the previous week. However, researchers could account for only enough worshipers to produce an attendance rate of about 20% (Hadaway *et al.*, 1993, pp. 743–744). Counts from 18 Catholic dioceses in the United States yielded a similar result. Instead of the Mass attendance rate of 51% calculated by the Gallup Poll, just 28% of Catholics appeared in the flesh to occupy a pew in those places on the weekend (Hadaway *et al.*, 1993, pp. 745–748).

A portion of the gap dividing reported from actual rates can be blamed on what polling experts call “social desirability bias”: that is, respondents hope to impress interviewers by claiming a virtuous habit, whether or not they practice it faithfully. However, the more substantial explanation for this difference is that respondents, when questioned about a given week, are describing what they *customarily do*, not what they *may have done* in the queried instance (Hadaway *et al.*, 1993, pp. 748–749; Marler & Hadaway, 1999, pp. 177 and 182–185). The misreporting of activity “results from active church members reporting behavior that is consistent with their perceptions of themselves as active churchgoers” (Marler & Hadaway, 1999, p. 184).

NON-AFFILIATION IN, AND DISAFFILIATION FROM, THE CHURCHES

After a long spell of relative stability, the rates at which Americans admit to survey interviewers that they have “no religion” have risen sharply in recent decades. Two sociologists (Hout & Fischer, 2002, pp. 166 and 188), analyzing decades of data from sample survey questions, discovered that the proportion of American adults who declared no religious preference actually doubled, from 7% to 14%, during the 1990s. By 2008, that proportion had reached 17% (Chaves, 2011, p. 17). For these reasons, religious “nones” have been characterized as “the fastest growing religious category in America ...” (Lim, MacGregor, & Putnam, 2010, p. 613; compare Baker & Smith, 2009a).

A number of factors account for this change, from mere cohort replacement (younger respondents are more likely to indicate a lack of a religious affiliation than older ones [Roof & McKinney, 1987]), the fact that more young people today than in the past were raised in nonreligious households, a later age

at first marriage (freeing some from conformity to spousal pressures regarding religion [Hadaway & Marler, 1993, p. 108]), and the greater accessibility of higher education (Baker & Smith, 2009a, pp. 1257–1259; Hadaway & Marler, 1993, p. 104; Hout & Fischer, 2002, pp. 168–172). These patterns prevail not only in the United States and Canada, but throughout Western Europe in countries such as Denmark, France, and the Netherlands (Hayes, 2000, pp. 192 and 199–204).

It would be a grave error, however, to assume that persons who subscribe to no particular religion are all staunch secularists, or, as two authors on the topic (Baker & Smith, 2009b, p. 731) have put it, “part of an increasing wave of secularity.” To the contrary, those with no religion are in actuality a diverse group (Greeley & Hout, 1999, p. 813; Hayes, 2000, pp. 195–198 and 205–206; Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 173) that includes only a small core of convinced atheists—perhaps 3% to 5%, a tiny slice of the total population, reviled and rejected by their fellow citizens (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006, pp. 214, 217–220, and 223–225). Atheists are less popular in American society than either homosexuals or Muslims (Edgell *et al.*, 2006, pp. 217–218 and 230)—although surveys seldom ask their respondents to compare atheists to homosexual Muslims.

The atheists are dwarfed by a much larger number of agnostics (religious doubters who nevertheless are “not vehemently opposed to religion in all forms” [Baker & Smith, 2009b, p. 731]) and a sizeable plurality of what some have labeled “unchurched believers,” whose private religious thoughts and behaviors are not much different, in at least some respects, from those of churchgoers (Baker & Smith, 2009a, p. 1260). To illustrate this similarity, the General Social Surveys from 1998 and 2000 found that more than two thirds of religious “nones” reported “belief in God or a higher power,” while 57% in 1998 believed in life after death. More than one-third endorsed the existence of miracles that were accomplished through religion. Ninety-three percent confessed that they prayed at least occasionally, and a surprising one-fifth answered that they prayed daily (Hout & Fischer, 2002, pp. 173–175). Hence, “the new ‘nones,’” Hout and Fischer (2002, pp. 173 and 175) have deduced, are “believers opting out of organized religion rather than people who lost faith as well as religion Their most distinguishing feature is their avoidance of churches.”

These believers who normally avoid churches constitute the most organizationally unstable component of the “no religion” category. The line in their own minds that separates religious belonging from independence is fluid and floating, porous and penetrable: about equal numbers of loosely connected believers shift into church membership and out again from year to year (Lim *et al.*, 2010, pp. 603–604). They are reputed to sustain “a weak sense of attachment to a religious tradition and thus may identify with the tradition

sometimes, if not always." As a result, "each of the major religious traditions seems to be surrounded by a penumbra of loosely attached 'liminal' affiliates" (Lim *et al.*, 2010, pp. 597 and 610).

Looming large among those who stand aloof from "organized" religion are the rising numbers of people who profess that they are "spiritual, but not religious" (Baker & Smith, 2009b, p. 724). Their self-identification as nonreligious notwithstanding, about 40% of those who forsake a stable denominational tie say that they are "at least moderately spiritual." Their estrangement from an active church life, suggests survey evidence, reflects "significant antipathy toward organized religion" (Hout & Fischer, 2002, pp. 176 and 177). This animus, in turn, is concentrated among political moderates and liberals and appears to be rooted in a distaste for the increasingly vocal advocacy of conservative public policies on the part of many churches (Chaves, 2011, pp. 20–21; Hout & Fischer, 2002, pp. 178–186).

GROWTH IN NON-JUDEO-CHRISTIAN FAITHS

In recent years, the presence in the United States of persons who practice faiths outside of the Judeo-Christian majority has grown markedly. Although the numbers of such practitioners are still small in absolute terms, their proportion of the national population has been steadily increasing. Taken together, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism comprised around one-half of 1% of Americans in the early 1970s, according to the General Social Survey; by the year 2000, that percentage had approximately tripled (Smith, 2002, p. 578). Again, this change makes for persistently low totals, but it raises the visibility and therefore the attention that such faiths receive in the broader culture (Smith, 2002, pp. 582–583).

A parallel development in religion, not just for the United States but also for Western Europe and much of the developed world, has been the emergence and proliferation since the 1960s of an eclectic variety of spirituality referred to as *the New Age*. While this movement to date does not entail large numbers of participants, some deem it to offer a glimpse of religion's future in postmodern circumstances. As two Dutch sociologists (Houtman & Aupers, 2007, p. 315) have remarked, "What we are witnessing today is not so much a disappearance of religion, but rather a relocation of the sacred. Gradually losing its transcendent character, the sacred becomes more and more conceived of as ... residing in the deeper layers of the self."

Critics of this brand of religion have taken to calling it diffuse and fragmented, even incoherent. Its promoters, however, regard its ideological looseness as welcome freedom and its sprawling quality as testimony to the expanding consciousness of the sacred that is necessary for personal growth (Houtman & Aupers, 2007, pp. 306–308). Indeed, in many New Age

groups, the sacred is treated as immanent: that is to say, it is individual and in-dwelling. The divine is not confined to a distant, hard-to-reach realm residing over and above our pedestrian reality. Rather, religions of the New Age teach that spiritual enlightenment is achievable because its rudiments are embedded in our everyday experience. What is required for us to notice and to understand them, however, are new cognitive and emotional lenses through which to view and to think about that experience. New Age religions find spiritual truth not in a fixed creed that is reinforced by dogmatic consensus among believers. For them, the New Age is anti-authoritarian in matters of the spirit. Purported insights that for others are disorganized and irrational to the point of being nonsensical are to New Agers holistic and intuitive—even playful.

Survey research (e.g., Houtman & Aupers, 2007, pp. 314–315) has established that New Age beliefs are more prevalent in younger cohorts than among the older population and that they are found more commonly among those who have renounced cultural traditionalism, often as a consequence of advanced education.

FUTURE PATTERNS

Scholars of population (e.g., Skirbekk *et al.*, 2010) have projected religious trends 30 years into the future. Considering trends in migration and fertility, in addition to patterns of conversion, these projections forecast some substantial changes in the religious backgrounds and affiliations of the American public by the middle of the twenty-first century. The United States especially will remain a religiously diverse country with a Christian majority. Nevertheless, the groups that compose its religious system will be undergoing profound changes.

In particular, the size of America's "Protestant Establishment" is fated to further erosion as its members age and are not replaced in sufficient numbers. Numbers of Jews in the United States will decline modestly as well. The Roman Catholic proportion of the national population will continue to gain in size, as will the fractions of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. The religiously unaffiliated and the nonreligious also will grow (Hadaway & Marler, 1993, p. 112; Skirbekk *et al.*, 2010, p. 302), although possibly at a slower rate than in the recent past because of the passing of the countercultural cohorts that matured in the 1960s and 1970s (Hout & Fischer, 2002, pp. 182–185; Schwadel, 2010, pp. 311–319).

The Catholic population will see considerable growth in the next half-century. White (i.e., non-Hispanic) Catholics have reached replacement-level fertility, yet their future numbers are expected to suffer from continued switching to Protestant denominations, and more so, to the ranks of those

with no reported religion. These losses, however, are more than compensated for, statistically, by immigration from countries where Catholicism is the dominant faith and by the younger age profile and the higher-than-average fertility of Catholic Latinas (Sherkat, 2001, pp. 1470–1473, 1487, and 1489 [Note 6]; Skirbekk *et al.*, 2010, p. 294). Assuming the maintenance of existing rates of immigration and religious switching,

Catholics in the youngest age cohorts will outnumber their Protestant counterparts by 2043 and take over some time in the second half of the twenty-first century. This would principally be due to higher Hispanic Catholic fertility and immigration This represents a historic moment for a country settled by anti-Catholic Puritans, whose Revolution was motivated in part by a desire to spread dissenting Protestantism and whose population on the eve of revolution was 98% Protestant.

[Skirbekk *et al.*, 2010, pp. 303 and 307]

In addition, increasing in size will be the nonreligious share of the American population. However, although this group posts large gains from switchers who are fleeing conventional faiths, its future growth is ultimately checked by very low rates of fertility. Thus, the disaffiliating swell the ranks of the unaffiliated, but once situated there, they do little to perpetuate themselves (Skirbekk *et al.*, 2010, p. 304). In this way, it is possible for “*society* to grow more religious even as *individuals* tend to become less religious over time” (Skirbekk *et al.*, 2010, p. 308; emphasis in the original).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

THE FOCUS AND LOCUS OF RELIGION

If it is true that the central *focus* for the academic analysis of religion is changing from the end product of tradition, the result of ascription, and the consequence of culture, to how institutional authority is abandoned to individual freedom and personal choice, then new ways of thinking and theorizing about the operation of religion should be summoned.

Room should be carved out conceptually, too, for the study of religion’s absence, or minimally, its minimal presence. Contend a pair of contributors to this area of research, “sociologists of religion seek to understand how *belief systems* are organized and the relationship between these systems and attitudes, action, and social institutions. Viewed in this light, nonreligious beliefs constitute an important aspect of such an academic endeavor” (Baker & Smith, 2009a, pp. 1260–1261; emphasis in the original).

If, as in the recent past, the public role of religion is consumed by its political force, more and more believers may decide that so long as organized religion

is to be about politics, their lives will be about principles and practices other than those that derive from religious organizations. Religion under such current conditions, then, would only accelerate its retreat on all fronts into the relative latitude of the private sphere.

If the *locus* of religious action so shifts, and the settings for “lived religion” (Edgell, 2012, pp. 253–255) migrate farther beyond the familiarity of churches and congregations (and churches transform themselves into “art galleries and cafés” (O’Leary, 2012), students of religion will need to devise modes of inquiry that would adequately open up to study the spiritualities that are lodged in such varied locales as the noisy cubicles in commercial workplaces, the hushed confines of hospital examining rooms, or the bored humdrum wafting through waiting areas at social-service agencies, in addition to the bustling lobbies of legislatures and the boisterous gatherings of eager volunteers. New techniques will be demanded for reaching religious actors well outside the regular realm of formal religion (Baker & Smith, 2009b, p. 730): historical methods for encountering religious meanings in the secular records of the past and qualitative methods for the real-time observation and interpretation of the religious components of everyday life in the present day.

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