

# **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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## ***Christianity in America: Evangelical Stability amid Widespread Decline***

The Pew Research Center recently released its *US Religious Landscape Study*, which summarizes the conclusions from a monumental study of how American religion has changed between 2007 and 2014. Conducted among 35,000 adults in English and Spanish, the study fills in the gaps left by the data released by the US Census Bureau. This is necessary because the Bureau does not ask Americans about their religion. What follows is a salient summary of this important survey. It enables us to understand what is happening across the American religious landscape.

Two primary conclusions:

1. Both the mainline and historically black Protestant traditions have lost more members than they have gained through religious switching, but within Christianity the greatest net losses, by far, have been experienced by Catholics. Nearly one-third of American adults (31.7%) say they were raised Catholic. Among that group, fully 41% no longer identify with Catholicism. This means that 12.9% of American adults are former Catholics, while just 2% of U.S. adults have converted to Catholicism from another religious tradition. No other religious group in the survey has such a lopsided ratio of losses to gains.
2. The evangelical Protestant tradition is the only major Christian group in the survey that has gained more members than it has lost through religious switching. Roughly 10% of U.S. adults now identify with evangelical Protestantism after having been raised in another tradition, which more than offsets the roughly 8% of adults who were raised as evangelicals but have left for another religious tradition or who no longer identify with any organized faith.

Three other significant observations:

1. Millennials are growing less affiliated with religion as they get older. Those born from 1981 to 1989 are becoming less affiliated with religion than they were a decade ago.
2. There are more religiously unaffiliated Americans (23%) than Catholic Americans (21%) or mainline Protestant Americans (15%). These losses are apparently due to “religious switching,” when someone switches from one faith to another. For example, 13% of Americans were raised Catholic but are no longer Catholic, compared with only 2% of Americans who convert to Catholicism. There are in fact 3 million fewer Catholics and 5 million fewer Protestants than there were in 2007.

3. Those who are unaffiliated are becoming more secular. The “nones” of this survey are the religiously unaffiliated, which includes atheists, agnostics or those who believe in “nothing particular.” They number 56 million and represent 23% of adults, up from 36 million and 16% in 2007. The low levels of Christian affiliation among the young, well educated and affluent are consistent with the data of those who are unaffiliated.

Other highlights of the report:

- The Christian share of the population is declining and the religiously unaffiliated share is growing in all four major geographic regions of the country. Religious “nones” now constitute 19% of the adult population in the South (up from 13% in 2007), 22% of the population in the Midwest (up from 16%), 25% of the population in the Northeast (up from 16%) and 28% of the population in the West (up from 21%). In the West, the religiously unaffiliated are more numerous than Catholics (23%), evangelicals (22%) and every other religious group.
- Whites continue to be more likely than both blacks and Hispanics to identify as religiously unaffiliated; 24% of whites say they have no religion, compared with 20% of Hispanics and 18% of blacks. But the religiously unaffiliated have grown (and Christians have declined) as a share of the population within all three of these racial and ethnic groups.
- The percentage of college graduates who identify with Christianity has declined by nine percentage points since 2007 (from 73% to 64%). The Christian share of the population has declined by a similar amount among those with less than a college education (from 81% to 73%). Religious “nones” now constitute 24% of all college graduates (up from 17%) and 22% of those with less than a college degree (up from 16%).
- More than a quarter of men (27%) now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up from 20% in 2007. Fewer women are religious “nones,” but the religiously unaffiliated are growing among women at about the same rate as among men. Nearly one-in-five women (19%) now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up from 13% in 2007.
- Although it is low relative to other religious groups, the retention rate of the unaffiliated has increased. In the current survey, 53% of those raised as religiously unaffiliated still identify as “nones” in adulthood, up seven points since 2007. And among Millennials, “nones” actually have one of the highest retention rates of all the religious categories that are large enough to analyze in the survey.
- As the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated continue to grow, they also describe themselves in increasingly secular terms. In 2007, 25% of the “nones” called themselves atheists or agnostics; 39% identified their religion as “nothing in particular” and also said that religion is “not too” or “not at all” important in their lives; and 36% identified their religion as “nothing in particular” while nevertheless saying that religion is either “very important” or “somewhat important” in their lives. The new survey finds that the atheist and agnostic

share of the “nones” has grown to 31%. Those identifying as “nothing in particular” and describing religion as unimportant in their lives continue to account for 39% of all “nones.” But the share identifying as “nothing in particular” while also affirming that religion is either “very” or “somewhat” important to them has fallen to 30% of all “nones.”

- The United Methodist Church (UMC) continues to be the largest denomination within the mainline Protestant tradition. Currently, 25% of mainline Protestants identify with the UMC, down slightly from 28% in 2007.
- More than six-in-ten people in the historically black Protestant tradition identify with Baptist denominations, including 22% who identify with the National Baptist Convention, the largest denomination within the historically black Protestant tradition.
- The share of the public identifying with religions other than Christianity has grown from 4.7% in 2007 to 5.9% in 2014. Gains were most pronounced among Muslims (who accounted for 0.4% of respondents in the 2007 Religious Landscape Study and 0.9% in 2014) and Hindus (0.4% in 2007 vs. 0.7% in 2014).
- Roughly one-in-seven participants in the new survey (15%) were born outside the U.S., and two-thirds of those immigrants are Christians, including 39% who are Catholic. More than one-in-ten immigrants identify with a non-Christian faith, such as Islam or Hinduism.
- Hindus and Jews continue to be the most highly educated religious traditions. Fully 77% of Hindus are college graduates, as are 59% of Jews (compared with 27% of all U.S. adults). These groups also have above-average household incomes. Fully 44% of Jews and 36% of Hindus say their annual family income exceeds \$100,000, compared with 19% of the public overall.

**Key Conclusion:** The survey confirms that the face of American religion is changing. But of all the different groups, evangelicals remain the strongest and most stable. While the mainline Protestant share of the population is significantly smaller today than it was in 2007, the evangelical Protestant share of the population has remained comparatively stable (ticking downward slightly from 26.3% to 25.4% of the population). As a result, evangelicals now constitute a clear majority (55%) of all U.S. Protestants. In 2007, roughly half of Protestants (51%) identified with evangelical churches. Since 2007, the share of evangelical Protestants who identify with Baptist denominations has shrunk from 41% to 36%. Meanwhile, the share of evangelicals identifying with nondenominational churches has grown from 13% to 19%. Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra of *Christianity Today* further summarizes the report’s conclusions about evangelicalism:

1. The label “evangelical” is more popular among all Christian groups.
2. Evangelicals convert many and retain their kids.

3. Evangelicals are increasingly diverse. In fact, more than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of US adults identify as born-again or evangelical Protestants, regardless of denomination, are non-white.

The Pew Survey is an extremely valuable snapshot of the growing complexity of the American religious scene. But it does confirm one important truth: Those churches/groups that consistently preach the Word of God are the most stable. Where truth is proclaimed, stability and growth will occur. It also should motivate us as evangelicals to even more vigorously proclaim the gospel, for it is the only means of personal transformation. May we seize this tremendous opportunity.

See Nate Cohn in the *New York Times* (12 May 2015); Sarah Pulliam Bailey in the *Washington Post* (12 May 2015); Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra in [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (13 May 2015). The entire report is available at the Pew Research Center website, from which I drew some of the summary statements.