

Christians in decline, nones on the rise

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) in the [June 10, 2015](#) issue

The United States is a significantly less Christian country than it was seven years ago. That's the top finding in the Pew Research Center's report, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, released May 12.

This trend "is big, it's broad, and it's everywhere," said Alan Cooperman, Pew's director of religion research.

Christianity still dominates American religious identity (71 percent), but the survey shows dramatic shifts as more people move out of denominations. Atheists and agnostics have nearly doubled their share of the religious marketplace, and overall indifference to religion is rising as well.

"Of the major subgroups within American Christianity, mainline Protestantism," the report states, "appears to have experienced the greatest drop in absolute numbers."

The total number of mainline adults dropped by 5 million from 41 million in 2007 to 36 million in 2014, according to the report's estimates. Among the larger Christian bodies, only the historically black Protestant churches—counted separately from mainline churches—have held steady through the years of change, at nearly 16 million adults.

The shrinking numbers of Christians and their loss of market share is the most significant change between 2007 (when Pew did its first U.S. Religious Landscape survey) and the new survey of 35,000 U.S. adults. The percentage of people who describe themselves as Christians fell about 8 points—from 78.4 to 70.6.

"Whether they are nearing retirement or just entering adulthood, married or single, living in the West or the Bible Belt, Americans in virtually all demographic groups are significantly less likely to describe themselves as Christians and more likely to identify as religious 'nones,'" according to the survey report.

State-by-state and regional data show the following:

- Massachusetts shows a drop in Catholics by 10 percentage points. South Carolina is down the same degree in evangelicals.
- Mainline Protestants declined all over the Midwest by 3 to 4 percentage points.
- The Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church, the country's two largest Protestant denominations, are each down 1.4 to 1.5 percentage points.
- Every tradition took a hit in the West as the number of people who claim no religious affiliation continues to climb.

In Christian denominations, each successive age group is less connected than that group's parents—and there is “switching” at all ages, the report shows. While nearly 86 percent of Americans say they grew up as Christians, nearly one in five (19 percent) say they aren't Christian anymore.

“Overall, there are more than four former Christians for every convert to Christianity,” Cooperman said.

Although evangelicals are part of the decline, their slide has been less steep. They benefit from more people joining evangelical traditions, though they're also affected by generational change.

According to the survey, white “born-again or evangelical” Protestants now account for 19 percent of American adults, down slightly from 21 percent in 2007.

Politicians should take note, said Mike Hout, a sociologist and demographer at New York University who is also a co-director of the General Social Survey, a biennial national demographic survey.

“Traditionally, we thought religion was the mover and politics were the consequence,” he said. Today, it's the opposite.

Many of today's formerly faithful left conservative evangelical or Catholic denominations because “they saw them align with a conservative political agenda, and they don't want to be identified with that,” Hout said.

Catholics dropped both in percentage and in real numbers. Despite their high retention rate for people reared in the faith, they have a low conversion rate. Today, Cooperman said, 13 percent of U.S. adults are former Catholics, up from 10 percent in 2007.

The nones—Americans who are unaffiliated with brand-name religion—are “more comfortable admitting it” than ever before, said John Green, director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, Ohio. Their growth spans the generations, as well as racial and ethnic groups, said Green, a senior fellow in religion and American politics for the Pew Research Center.

Nones, at 22.8 percent of the U.S. population (up from 16 percent just eight years ago), run behind only evangelicals (25.4 percent) and ahead of Catholics (20.8 percent) in share of the religious market.

The nones’ numbers are now big enough to show noteworthy diversity. Atheists rose from 1.6 percent to 3.1 percent, and agnostics from 2.4 to 4 percent. Combined, there are more nones than Evangelical Lutherans, United Methodists, and Episcopalians combined.

David Silverman, president of American Atheists, suggested that the public attention given to nones in the last decade and access to antireligious discussion on the Internet drive the change.

“More people know the facts, and more people realize they are not alone,” Silverman said.

The bulk of the nones would not identify themselves as atheist or agnostic. Instead, they believe “nothing in particular.” But among them, there’s a distinct split between “spiritual” and totally indifferent nones. Thirty percent of all nones still showed “a sort of religious pulse” by saying that religion is still somewhat important to them, Cooperman said.

However, for most people in this group (39 percent), religion is not even somewhat important to them.

That lack of interest cuts into their social and political clout, Hout said. The nothing-in-particular folks “don’t vote, don’t marry, and don’t have kids” at the same rate as other Americans, Hout said. “They are allergic to large, organized institutions—mass media, religions, big corporations, and political parties.”

“None” is the winning category for religious switchers across society, particularly among gays and lesbians—41 percent of gay or lesbian Americans say they have no religion, Cooperman said. “This suggests the degree of alienation and discomfort

and sense of being unwelcome that they may have felt in traditional religious groups.”

Other trends of note are as follows:

- Among Americans who have gotten married since 2010, nearly four in ten (39 percent) report that they are in religiously mixed marriages, compared with 19 percent among those who got married before 1960, according to the report.
- Racial and ethnic minorities now make up 41 percent of Catholics (up from 35 percent in 2007), 24 percent of evangelicals (up from 19 percent), and 14 percent of mainline Protestants (up from 9 percent). The share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths also has inched up, rising 1.2 percentage points, from 4.7 percent in 2007 to 5.9 percent in 2014. Growth has been especially great among Muslims and Hindus, the report states.

The latest survey was conducted among a nationally representative sample of 35,071 adults interviewed by telephone from June 4 to September 30, 2014. The margin of error on overall findings is plus or minus 0.6 percentage points.

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