

Survey: U.S. grows less religious, less Christian: Self-identified Christians down 10 percent

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The nation has grown less religious in the last two decades, a new study shows, with a 10 percent drop in the number of people who call themselves Christians and increases in all 50 states among those who are not aligned with any faith.

Between 1990 and 2008, the percentage of Americans who identified themselves as Christian dropped from 86 percent to 76 percent, reports the new American Religious Identification Survey, a wide-ranging report released March 9.

The group that researchers call the “nones”—atheists, agnostics and other secularists—have almost doubled in that time period, from 8.2 percent to 15 percent.

And in a further indication of growing secularism, more than a quarter of Americans—27 percent—said they do not expect to have a religious funeral when they die.

“Traditionally, historically, people are interested in their immortal soul, salvation, heaven and hell,” said Barry Kosmin, coauthor of the survey and director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College in Connecticut. “If you don’t have a religious funeral, you’re probably not interested in heaven and hell.”

The survey of more than 54,000 respondents followed similar large studies in 2001 and in 1990. Though the largest increase in “nones” occurred between 1990 and 2001 (from 8.2 percent to 14.1 percent), Kosmin said more people have been willing to identify themselves as atheist or agnostic in the last seven years.

“There’s the antireligious group among what we call the ‘nones,’” he said, “but then the kind of non religious, the irreligious . . . have also increased.”

The survey found a surge in the number of people who called themselves “nondenominational Christians,” from fewer than 200,000 in 1990 to more than 8 million in 2008.

“Brand loyalty is gone,” Kosmin said. “Those labels are no longer meaningful.”

Researchers also found that 45 percent of U.S. Christians consider themselves born-again or evangelicals—including 39 percent of mainline Christians and 18 percent of Catholics—which could indicate that exit pollsters may be hearing from a broad range of “evangelicals.”

Some experts say the “nones” figure, together with increases in “nondenominational” numbers, helps to explain why the proportion identifying with mainline Protestantism continues to shrink, falling from 18.7 percent in 1990 to 12.9 percent in 2008.

“What you see is the erosion of the religious middle ground,” said Kosmin. “Liberal religion has been eroded by irreligion and conservative religion.”

Mark Silk, who directs Trinity College’s Program on Public Values and helped design the new study, said the almost threefold increase in “nones” in New England was larger than the increases in other states.

“You’ve got Vermont, 34 percent nones,” said Silk, coauthor of *One Nation, Divisible: How Regional Religious Differences Shape American Politics*. “Northern New England now is more the ‘none zone.’ The Pacific Northwest is still up there, but the increase in New England—that’s very striking. It says a lot about the decline of Catholicism.”

The research echoes findings of a recent Gallup poll that revealed that only 42 percent of Vermonters said religion is “an important part” of their daily lives—the lowest percentage of state residents polled across the country.

R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said the findings—including the one that more than a quarter of Americans don’t expect a religious funeral—really bring home the secular nature of a sizable slice of the U.S. population.

“As an evangelical Christian, I see this as further evidence of the fact that American Christians live in the midst of a vast mission field and this should be a wake-up

call—I would say, yet another wake-up call—to the magnitude of our task in sharing the gospel in modern America,” Mohler said. *Religion News Service*