

Study shows steady levels of religious practice

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This article appears in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue.

The number of nonreligious people in America is increasing, but the faithful remain observant, according to the second part of the 2014 U.S. religious landscape study from the Pew Research Center, released in November. The first part of the study, released in May, showed that the nation is significantly less Christian than it was seven years ago given the rising number of people with no religious affiliation.

“Is America becoming less religious?” asked Gregory Smith, the Pew study’s lead researcher. “It depends on where you look. If you’re looking at the public as a whole, then the answer is yes—we find small but statistically significant declines, overall, in belief in God and several other conventional measures of religious commitment. But if you focus just on people who say they belong to a religion—and that’s the vast majority of Americans—they are, on balance, every bit as religious as they were in the recent past.”

Self-described nones grew from 16 percent of American adults in 2007 to 23 percent in 2014, and those who say they believe in God dropped from 70 to 61 percent in the same time period.

At the same time, religious observance has stayed constant: the percentage of worshipers who believe in God, pray daily, and attend religious services at least monthly holds steady at around two-thirds or higher, according to the Pew study. In fact, 41 percent rely on their religious beliefs for guidance to make decisions, up from 34 percent seven years ago.

America experiences cycles of religiosity, said Frank Newport, editor in chief at Gallup. Americans attend church regularly at roughly the same levels that they did in the 1940s, he said, but they have the perception of unprecedented decrease because churchgoing in the 1950s and ’60s became unusually high.

America is far from becoming a nation without houses of prayer. On any given sabbath, for instance, some four out of ten Americans will make their way to churches and synagogues, mosques and temples—a number that hasn't fluctuated dramatically in the past half century.

“People who say they have a religion . . . are just as likely to say that religion plays a very important role in their lives,” said Alan Cooperman, director of religion research at Pew. “On some measures there are even small increases in their levels of religious practice.”

More religiously affiliated adults, for example, read scripture regularly and participate in small religious groups than did so seven years ago, according to the survey. And 88 percent of religiously affiliated adults said they prayed daily, weekly, or monthly—the same percentage that reported such regular prayer in the first landscape study in 2007.

The researchers also found that as religiosity in America wanes, a more general spirituality is on the rise, with six in ten adults saying they regularly feel a “deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being,” up 7 percentage points since 2007. Also increasing: the number of people who experienced a “deep sense of wonder” about the universe, which also jumped 7 percentage points.

These trends make sense, in that religious affiliation in America today is “increasingly shaped by individual choice and less by inheritance from a family or community,” said Andrew Walsh, a historian of American religion at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Though the current social climate allows Americans to choose not to affiliate with a religious institution, many “are still spiritual in some ways.”

One sign: the proliferation of yoga studios throughout the nation. Most enthusiasts of the meditative practice are not looking to convert to Hinduism, Walsh said, but they may nevertheless find the activity spiritually gratifying.

Cooperman cautioned, however, against concluding that such spirituality is replacing more traditional kinds of religious experiences, such as attending religious services.

“On the contrary, the people in the survey who express the most spirituality are the people who are the most religious in conventional ways,” he said, “and the respondents who are the least attached to traditional religion, including the ‘nones,’ report much lower levels of spiritual experiences.”

Other striking numbers in the study describe changing Christian attitudes toward gay and lesbian Americans. Though the new landscape survey is not the first to document such change, it shows in detail how dramatically members of a broad set of denominations—even those that officially oppose same-sex marriage—have shifted in their views.

The number of evangelical Protestants, for example, who said they agreed that “homosexuality should be accepted by society” jumped 10 percentage points between the 2007 and 2014 studies—from 26 percent to 36 percent. The increase for Catholics was even steeper, from 58 percent to 70 percent. For historically black Protestant churches, acceptance jumped from 39 percent to 51 percent.

“Despite attempts to paint religious people as monolithically opposed to LGBT rights, that’s just not the case and these numbers prove that,” said Jay Brown, head of research and education at the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, a national advocacy group. “There’s growing support of LGBT people and our families, often not in spite of people’s religions but because the very foundation of their faith encourages love, acceptance, and support for their fellow human beings.”

On abortion, attitudes held steady, as has been the case since the Supreme Court made abortion a constitutional right in 1973. The study shows that 53 percent of Americans believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases, with views within denominations shifting little since the first landscape study.

Other findings from the study include the following:

- A minority of Jews—40 percent—and the vast majority of Muslims—90 percent—say they do not eat pork, the consumption of which is forbidden by Jewish and Islamic law. Hinduism does not allow beef to be eaten, and nearly seven in ten Hindus (67 percent) say they do not eat it.
- Nearly nine in ten Americans say religious institutions bring people together and strengthen community bonds, and 87 percent say they play an important role in helping the poor and needy.
- Six in ten adults, and three-quarters of Christians, believe that the Bible or other holy scripture is the word of God. About 31 percent—39 percent of Christians—believe it should be interpreted literally.

The 2014 Religious Landscape Study interviewed 35,071 Americans and has a margin of error of plus or minus less than 1 percentage point.

This article was edited on November 25, 2015.