

Notion of a 'Christian America' dwindling even further, study shows

The number of people who are not affiliated with organized religion continues to grow.

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [October 10, 2017](#) issue

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(RNS) — Almost every Christian denomination in the United States shows signs of growing diversity, according to a study released in September by the Public Religion Research Institute.

White Christians, once the majority in most mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations, have given way to younger members, who are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

And while the decline of white mainline Protestants and Catholics has been documented in earlier surveys, the new PRRI survey shows a similar and relatively recent decline among white evangelicals: from 23 percent to 17 percent of the public from 2006 to 2016.

“This report provides solid evidence of a new, second wave of white Christian decline that is occurring among white evangelical Protestants just over the last decade,” said Robert P. Jones, PRRI’s CEO and author of *The End of White Christian America*. “Prior to 2008, white evangelical Protestants seemed to be exempt from the waves of demographic change and disaffiliation that were eroding the membership bases of white mainline Protestants and white Catholics. . . . We now see that these waves simply crested later for white evangelical Protestants.”

The study, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, also further confirmed the rising presence of the nones—atheists, agnostics, and those who say they do not identify with any particular religion—who are about one-quarter (24 percent) of the population.

Researchers contacted 101,000 Americans in 50 states. The survey has an overall margin of error of plus or minus 0.4 percentage points.

Among the survey's chief findings:

- White Christians, 81 percent of the population in 1976, now account for less than half the public—43 percent of Americans identify as white Christians, and 30 percent as white Protestants.
- 92 percent of Lutherans are white, more than in any other denomination.
- White Christians are aging. About one in ten white Catholics, evangelicals, and mainline Protestants are younger than 30, compared with one-third of all Hindus and Buddhists.
- Muslims and Mormons are the youngest faith groups in the United States, with 42 percent of all Muslims under 30, and nearly a quarter of all Mormons.

The PRRI survey also reveals that:

- A majority of Catholics now live in the South (29 percent) or West (25 percent). That's a reversal from four decades ago, when seven in ten Catholics lived in the Northeast or the Midwest.
- Almost half (46 percent) of LGBT Americans are religiously unaffiliated—about twice the figure for the general population (24 percent).
- Mississippi is the most homogeneous state in terms of religion (60 percent are Baptist) while New York is the most religiously diverse.
- There are now 20 states in which the religiously unaffiliated outnumber adherents of any other single religious group. Most of those states are on or near a coast; they include Vermont (41 percent unaffiliated), Oregon (36 percent), Washington (35 percent), and Hawaii (34 percent).

The rise in the religiously unaffiliated means people must now ask old questions in new ways, said Jennifer W. Davidson, an associate professor of theology and worship at the American Baptist Seminary of the West.

“We need to begin asking people, ‘How do you make meaning in your life? What sustains you when you suffer? How do you cultivate a sense of wonder?’” she said. “It is fully possible to answer these questions from a secular perspective, and if we asked them, we might be able to see abundantly fruitful connections among people who are religiously affiliated, religiously unaffiliated, secular, agnostic, and atheist.”

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