

Major stories in American Christianity of the 2010s

## How faith has been shaped by *Obergefell*, the Charleston murders, Me Too, and more

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [January 29, 2020](#) issue



Clockwise from upper left: Deena Kennedy (left) holds a sticker for a new gender neutral bathroom during a ceremonial opening at a high school in Seattle (AP Photo / Elaine Thompson). An audience in Pittsburgh listens to Tarana Burke talk about founding the Me Too movement (Stephanie Strasburg / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette via AP). Jim Obergefell, the plaintiff in the Supreme Court case that legalized same-sex marriage, speaks to supporters (AP Photo / Eric Gay). Al Sharpton prays with local ministers outside Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina (AP Photo / Allen G. Breed).

Decades provide a useful structure for organizing and understanding history, even though they are arbitrary demarcations. Nobody pretends that major historical trends fit neatly within such limits, yet terms like “the twenties,” “the sixties,” or “the eighties” do conjure particular images and memories, and they have prompted useful chronicles.

Whatever we want to call the decade just completed (the twenty-teens?), it has encompassed some major developments in religion. To understand how significant these are, we might imagine ourselves in 2010, standing at the brink of the decade and unaware of the dramatic—and in some cases almost unthinkable—events about to unfold.

What will future historians of religion highlight when they write the history of the 2010s? What tremors reshaped the landscape of faith? Below is my list of the key developments of the era. In each instance, I identify a year of particular importance, though each phenomenon spanned several years. My focus here is primarily on the American scene and on events affecting Christianity. The trends identified here will continue to play out through the coming decade. In that sense, these particular landmarks have established our vocabulary of debate for years to come.

**The rise of the nones** (2012): Scholars have long argued that religion declines as societies become economically advanced, more wealthy, and better educated. That analysis has applied well in most countries—with the glaring exception of the United States, which has retained its extraordinarily high religiosity.

Yet, in the past decade, signs of a secularizing trend in the US have become powerful, notably with the steep rise of the nones, those who say they have no religious affiliation. The phenomenon attracted a new level of public attention with a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center titled “*Nones*” on the Rise, which noted that one in five adults stated no religious affiliation. According to researchers at Pew, the number of nones has grown from 15 percent in 2007 to 26 percent today, making them a slightly larger group than either evangelical Protestants or Roman Catholics, the nation’s two largest religious groups. The percentage of nones is significantly higher among younger respondents, suggesting that they will become ever more common in future years.

It was in the 2010s that a secularizing trend became unmistakable.

The data can be misleading: most nones are neither atheist nor agnostic, but rather “nothing in particular.” Their refusal even to identify with such broad labels as Christian, Protestant, or Catholic may reflect a disgust with culture war politics or a rejection of institutional failings rather than an abandonment of religion as such. Still, something very significant in the religious landscape has changed.

**The papacy of Pope Francis (2013):** In 2013 Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina was elected pope, the head of what still remains by far the largest religious institution on the planet. Attention initially focused on him being the first pope in modern times to come from the Global South, where Catholic numbers are growing immensely. He is a sharp critic of capitalism and has urged the church to adopt what he describes as a more pastoral, less dogmatic approach to abortion, homosexuality, contraception, and transgender issues.

In the US context, Francis’s papacy has inspired both hopes and fears in a church still struggling with fallout from a generation of clergy abuse scandals and with a sharply declining share of the population. Factions in the church remain sharply divided over Francis. While his reforming instincts have inspired hope among liberals, others perceive Francis as a threat to traditional orthodoxy. These tensions reflect deeper tensions in the church in the US.

***Obergefell* and the redefinition of marriage (2015):** It is difficult for anyone under 40 to realize just how very rapidly the concept of same sex-marriage has ceased to be viewed as extreme and outlandish and moved into mainstream life. In the opening years of the century, many quite liberal politicians—including Barack Obama—were hesitant about openly advocating the idea. But after years of state victories, same-sex marriage was resoundingly affirmed by the US Supreme Court in 2015 in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which removed obstacles to marriage equality across the nation.

*Obergefell* raised critical questions for all American churches and religious institutions, for which weddings have always been a core function. Institutions morally opposed to same-sex marriage faced fundamental questions about how far the civil standard could be incorporated into their religious practice and theology. The struggle is all the greater for many younger members of churches or synagogues who have difficulty understanding why their institutions should be so slow to accept what appears to them to be obvious and inevitable social progress.

The marriage issue adds to the many legal confrontations that pit LGBT rights against those of conservative believers. A series of court cases tested how and on what grounds businesses have the right to refuse to participate in same-sex wedding ceremonies. In the United Methodist Church, the issue of same-sex marriage is at the heart of a battle over the governance of that global church and the locus of authority within it.

**Charleston murders and the problem of whiteness** (2015): As with gay issues, the speed of change in views of race and racial justice has been astonishing. A decade ago, Confederate flags, statues, and commemorative names were commonplace not only in the South but across the nation. A very large proportion have since either been removed or are targeted for removal.

Attitudes changed quickly following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a white man, in 2012 in the shooting death of African American teen Trayvon Martin and following the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. These events and similar confrontations ignited the Black Lives Matter movement. A further decisive event was the 2015 massacre of nine church members at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by a white supremacist.

Ideas and rhetoric about racial injustice which would once have been confined to political radicals became mainstream, especially in the identification and denunciations of white supremacy as a pervasive reality of American life, past and present. Those shifting perceptions ignited debates in many churches about such issues as inherited privilege, the heritage of slavery, and reparations. Churches have been centrally engaged in the nation's ongoing reexamination of its history, scrutinizing the problem of whiteness in ways that would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

**Climate change and *Laudato si*** (2015): Concern about global warming has been commonplace for a quarter century, and public attention was galvanized by Al Gore's 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth*. But the scope and intensity of concern increased immeasurably during the past decade, with a widespread sense that the basic scientific questions on climate change are settled and that those who reject the consensus can be dismissed as "denialists."

As climate concern moved to the center of political debate, it inspired activism within churches. In 2015, Pope Francis issued the ambitious and wide-ranging encyclical *Laudato si*, a thoughtful theological manifesto about the proper care of the planet, including a condemnation of shortsighted materialism. This was a notable attempt to place the church at the forefront of a key social movement.

**Trump and the evangelicals** (2016): The 2016 election of Donald Trump as president will loom large in accounts of US political history for many reasons. In the area of religion, it represented a new era for evangelical Christians, who as a political bloc have played a vital role in national affairs over the past 40 years.

At first glance, Trump offered little that should have appealed to evangelicals, not least because of his multiple marriages and avowed sexual libertinism. Even so, he won the support of a sizable majority of self-described white evangelicals. The figure usually cited is 81 percent, which demands some unpacking, as that refers to the proportion of those who actually voted rather than a percentage of the total white evangelical population. Yet that number was commonly repeated and believed. Its implications were damaging in suggesting that these voters were driven by racial loyalties rather than any authentic religious sentiment. That interpretation caused much soul-searching among evangelicals and intensified generational and gender tensions within churches. It almost certainly has contributed to the rise of the nones.

**Gender and identity** (2016): A decade ago transgender issues had nothing like the visibility that they have today. One landmark event in that story occurred in 2016, when the Department of Education and the Department of Justice in the Obama administration issued a “Dear Colleague” letter demanding that schools recognize and defend rights of transgender students. This move detonated multiple legal contests, generally involving access to bathrooms and changing rooms on school premises.

If the transgender movement has not yet achieved mainstream status, its ideas and claims are widespread, and they will pose many difficult questions for religious institutions involving practical matters of ordaining or retaining clergy who shift genders, as well as extremely sensitive matters of language, notably in liturgy and biblical translation. This cultural revolution is only beginning.

**Me Too and women’s leadership** (2017): Hillary Clinton’s defeat in the 2016 presidential contest contributed to an already reenergized feminist movement

focused on issues of harassment, abuse, underrepresentation, and discrimination. In 2017, exposés of sexual harassment and assault in the entertainment world provoked a much wider series of revelations. In some cases, religious leaders were the targets of such complaints, with the assaults dating back many years. The Church Too movement joined the Me Too movement in encouraging women to name and challenge abusive male behavior in religious institutions.

This movement went far beyond specific allegations of misconduct to more general protests against persistent patriarchy in religious life. Evangelical churches in particular faced new challenges to theologies about complementarian gender roles and women's submission to male authority.

**Crisis of the seminaries** (2017): The nation's seminaries have faced growing financial pressures for decades, and the decline became acute—and in some cases irreversible—during the 2010s. Especially noteworthy were the 2015 decision by Andover Newton Theological School to sell its historic campus outside Boston and the 2017 closure of Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. EDS became affiliated with Union Theological School in New York, and Andover Newton has taken new form as part of Yale Divinity School.

Closures and mergers reflected plunging student numbers and coincided with a severe contraction in the number of churches able to employ full-time clergy. They also reflected the larger secular drift of the nation. Mainline churches were not alone in facing this crisis. Some Catholic seminaries survived only because of their ability to draw widely on recent immigrant populations from the Global South.

**Fertility rates and faith** (2019): Levels of religious faith and practice correlate closely with demographic factors, and above all with fertility—the number of children that an average woman will bear during her lifetime. The exact sequence of factors shaping this change is open to debate. However, since the 1960s European societies have moved decisively toward very low levels of fertility—below the number needed for a population to maintain its numbers—and in almost all cases that change has been accompanied by sweeping secularization. Other parts of the world have followed a similar pattern.

Americans, with their historically high fertility rates and strong levels of religious faith, long believed that they were exempt from this pattern. Over the past decade, however, US fertility rates have plunged below the replacement level and are

headed to numbers below those of Scandinavia. If European precedents hold true, these trends should be treated as a fire bell in the night for religious institutions.

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