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Religious Trends in America

Mark Chaves

This article describes 13 religions trends, using the General Social Survey and National Congregations Study: increasing religious diversity, fewer liberal Protestants, softening involvement in religious congregations, declining belief in an inerrant Bible, declining confidence in religious leaders, tighter connection between religiosity and political conservatism, more disapproval of religious leaders' political involvement, increasing diffuse spirituality, more technology use by congregations, more informal worship services, aging clergy and congregations, increasing ethnic diversity within congregations, and increasing concentration of people in the largest churches. One summary conclusion is that no indicator of traditional religious belief or practice is going up.

In this article I offer an overview of recent trends in American religion. I describe trends in the general population and also trends within religious congregations, drawing mainly on two sources of information. One source is the General Social Survey (GSS), a survey of the American adult population that has been conducted at least every other year since 1972. The other primary source is the National Congregations Study (NCS), a national survey of local religious congregations from across the religious spectrum. The NCS surveys, which I directed, were conducted in 1998 and 2006-07. These congregation surveys do not go back in time as far as the GSS, but they offer the best information we have about congregational change since 1998.[1]

Before I talk about trends, it is important to note that there is a lot in American religion that is not changing. The range of religious beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and practices which show continuity rather than change is impressive. The percentages of Americans who know God

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exists (64 percent), who ever had a born-again experience (36 percent), or who pray at least several times a week (69 percent) have remained steady from the 1980s to the present. The percentages who read the Bible at least weekly (31 percent), who watch religious television (28 percent), who feel extremely close to God (31 percent), who consider themselves very or extremely religious (26 percent), or who believe in heaven (86 percent) or hell (73 percent) have not changed notably during the 7-to-17 year periods over which they were measured by the GSS. There is much continuity, then, in the American public's basic religiosity. Moreover, by world standards, Americans remain remarkably religious in both belief and practice. Americans are more pious than people in any Western country, with the possible exception of Ireland.

Considering the continuing high levels of American religiosity, it is tempting to treat any signs of change as mere footnotes to the main story of continuity. But American religion has changed in recent decades, and it is important to clarify what is changing and what is staying the same. Recent religious trends mainly are slow-moving—even glacial. But slow-moving does not mean unimportant, and long-term, slow social change still can be profound social change. We should not overstate change, but we also should not allow the considerable continuity in American religion to blind us to the real change that has occurred and is occurring.

Thirteen Religious Trends

I will briefly describe 13 changes, eight relating to individual beliefs and practices and five relating to congregations.

Trend 1: Increasing Religious Diversity

The United States is more religiously diverse than it was even in 1972. This increasing diversity has several aspects. Perhaps most dramatically, the proportion of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has increased. This increase is most noticeable beginning in the 1990s, when it quickened, but it is a long-term trend. In 1957, three percent of Americans said they have no religious affiliation; by 2008, 17 percent said so.[2]

That increase in religious "nones" is coming mainly at the expense of Protestantism. The percent of people who identify with a Protestant denomination has declined from the low 60s in the early 1970s to just

over 50 percent today. Probably within a few years, the United States will no longer be a majority Protestant nation.

The percent of Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims still is very small, but recent waves of immigration have increased it. The number of people claiming a religion other than Christianity or Judaism more than doubled from about 1 percent in the 1970s to between 2.5 and 3 percent today.

Religious diversity could increase in a society without having much impact on people's day-to-day lives. If different religious groups were completely concentrated in different parts of the country, or if different groups were otherwise socially isolated from each other, then the country could become more religiously diverse even though most people still live in religiously homogenous social circles. But this is not what is happening. On the contrary, people's families and friendship circles also are more religiously diverse than they used to be.

It is not just that American society has become more religiously diverse. A cultural trend has accompanied this demographic trend: Americans have become more accepting of religious diversity and more appreciative of religions other than their own. Increasing religious intermarriage probably is the best indicator of this increased tolerance and even appreciation, but it shows up in other ways as well. The percentage of Americans who say they would vote for an otherwise qualified Catholic, Jew, or atheist who was running for President has increased dramatically since the middle of the twentieth century, to the point where today almost all say they would vote for a Catholic or Jew, and about half say they would vote for an atheist. In Muncie, Indiana, the percentage of high school students who agreed with the statement, "Christianity is the one true religion and everyone should be converted to it," dropped from 91 percent in 1924 to 41 percent in 1977. Today, three quarters of Americans say "yes" when asked if they believe there is any religion other than one's own that offers a true path to God; 70 percent say that religions other than their own can lead to eternal life. Not only is the United States more religiously diverse than it was several decades ago; Americans also appreciate religious diversity more than they once did.[3]

Trend 2: Fewer Liberal Protestants

Among Protestants, there is a decades-long shift in the center of gravity away from liberal or mainline denominations to conservative

and evangelical denominations. Today there are almost two conservative Protestants for every mainline Protestant. Note that the overall percent of evangelicals is not rising; this trend occurred because the percent of mainline Protestants has declined sharply. This shift is more a story of liberal losses than of evangelical gains.

This is a trend that we understand fairly well, and it is important to note that the causes have very little to do with people switching from mainline to conservative groups. Instead, a large part of this shift is produced by differential fertility rather than by religious switching—conservative Protestants have more children than mainline Protestants, and this has been true for a long time. Religious switching is relevant here, but not in the way many people think. The most important recent trend in religious switching is that conservative denominations lose fewer people to liberal denominations than they used to because upward social mobility no longer prompts switching from, say, Baptist affiliation, to Presbyterian or Episcopalian affiliation. Conservative denominations also do a better job of hanging on to their youth, losing fewer people to secularity.

So in recent decades evangelical denominations have held their ground while mainline denominations have declined. But it seems likely that the trajectories of conservative and liberal Protestant denominations will not be as different over the next several decades as they have been over the last several decades. Evangelical birthrates remain higher than liberal birthrates, but they are declining, narrowing the fertility gap between liberal and conservative Protestants. Conservative Protestant denominations continue to lose fewer people to the ranks of the unaffiliated than do more liberal denominations, but they are losing more than before. Indeed, several major conservative denominations have reported membership losses since 2007.

Trend 3: Softening Involvement in Religious Congregations

The third trend I want to mention concerns involvement in religious congregations, which mainly means attendance at worship services. This is the most studied and debated trend in American religion. The bottom line is that worship attendance clearly is not increasing, but reasonable people can disagree about whether the overall trend in recent decades is stable or slightly down. The most prudent conclusion is that attendance declined markedly from the 1950s to 1990, and it is

either stable or very slowly declining since 1990. The weekly church attendance rate, by the way, is closer to 25 percent than the 35 or 40 percent often reported, which we know from research documenting substantial over reporting when people are asked about their worship service attendance.[4]

Although weekly attendance rates have been relatively stable since 1990, the percent of people who *never* attend religious services has increased from 13 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2008. Perhaps most strikingly, generational differences in childhood religious socialization are appreciable. More recently born individuals are increasingly likely to say they had no religion when they were 16 years old and, beginning with people born after 1940, the percentage increases at a faster rate with each generation. The childhood weekly attendance rate reported by GSS respondents declines from nearly 80 percent among people born before 1910 to approximately 60 percent for those born after 1970. Most striking of all is a steady decline in the percentage of people who report growing up with religiously active fathers—from nearly 70 percent for those born before 1900 to about 45 percent for those born after 1970. There can be little doubt that Americans are increasingly less likely to grow up in religiously active households.

Putting all of this together, there seems to be softening involvement in American religious congregations over recent decades. Aggregate weekly attendance at worship services is either stable or very slowly declining since 1990, but it declined in the decades before that, and the percent of people who never attend is steadily increasing. Moreover, each new cohort of individuals attends religious services less than did earlier cohorts at the same age, and each new generation of Americans is less likely to be raised in a religiously active family than were earlier generations.

None of this decline is happening fast, and levels of religious involvement in the United States continue to remain very high by world standards. Calling this a softening rather than a decline in religious involvement strikes an interpretive balance between acknowledging the signs of changing religious involvement while also recognizing the still high levels of involvement with American religious organizations evident in the data.

Trend 4: Declining Belief in an Inerrant Bible

There is a long-term, gradual, slow but discernible, decline in belief in an inerrant Bible. Over the last 30 years, the percentage of people who say they believe that the Bible should be taken literally declined from approximately 40 percent to just over 30 percent. Connecting this trend with the increase described earlier in tolerance for, and even appreciation of, religions other than one's own, we might say that even in the midst of high levels of religious belief and practice in American society, there is declining confidence in the special status of one's own religion.

Trend 5: Declining Confidence in Leaders of Organized Religion

A fifth trend is declining confidence in organized religion. The percentage of people who say that they have a great deal of confidence in organized religion has declined from about 35 percent in the 1970s to about 25 percent today.

This declining confidence is not unique to religious organizations. Americans are less confident in the leaders of many kinds of institutions than they were in the 1970s. Still, confidence in religious leaders has declined faster than confidence in the leaders of other institutions. Between 1973 and 1983, 35 percent of people, on average, expressed a great deal of confidence in the leaders of religious organizations, compared with only 29 percent, on average, expressing a great deal of confidence across all of the other institutions about which they were asked. Between 1998 and 2008, only 25 percent expressed a great deal of confidence in religious organizations—the same percentage expressing a great deal of confidence, on average, in the other kinds of institutions. In the 1970s, religious leaders inspired somewhat greater public confidence than did leaders of other institutions, but their relative position has since declined. People now express as low a degree of confidence in religious leaders as they do, on average, in leaders of other major institutions.

A related point: a career in religious leadership is less attractive than it used to be, especially among young people. About 1 percent (10 in 1,000) of college freshmen expected to become clergy in the 1960s, declining to 0.3 percent (3 in 1,000) in the late 1980s, and remaining at about that level since then. That means that the level of interest in a

religious career among today's college freshmen is less than half what it was in 1970. This decline continues a very long-term trend. At the time of the Civil War, about 1 in 5 college graduates became clergy, declining to 6 percent by 1900.[5]

Trend 6: Tighter Connection Between Religiosity and Political Conservatism

A sixth trend is the increasingly tight connection between religiosity, on the one hand, and political and social conservatism, on the other hand. That is, the political differences between regular churchgoers and other people are larger now than they were several decades ago. In the 1970s, 9 percent of weekly attendees said that they were strong Republicans, compared to 7 percent of less frequent attendees. The comparable numbers in the 2000-08 surveys are 19 percent and 9 percent, respectively. Weekly attendees have moved from being nearly indistinguishable from others in their political party affiliations to being nearly twice as likely as others to call themselves strong Republicans. This is a significant change over a 30-year period.

Church attendance also is now more tightly connected to one's opinions about several key social issues, such as abortion and homosexuality. There is, however, an important difference in the underlying dynamic when it comes to views about homosexuality. As we saw in the previous paragraph, the connection between religious service attendance and Republican party identification has tightened because the most religious people have become more conservative over time. The same is true for attitudes about abortion. When it comes to homosexuality, however, both the most and the least religious Americans are trending in a liberal direction, but the most religious people are liberalizing more slowly than others: 85 percent of 1970s weekly attendees said that homosexuality is always wrong compared to 67 percent of infrequent attendees, while since 2000 the comparable numbers are 79 percent and 48 percent, respectively. On this issue, both groups are liberalizing, but the less religious people have liberalized faster.

All in all, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the attitudinal distance between the most and least religiously active people in U.S. society has increased in recent decades. These attitudinal differences may not warrant being called a culture war, but differences of opinion now line up with religious differences more than they did previously.[6]

Trend 7: More Disapproval of Religious Leaders' Political Involvement

At the same time that we see an increasingly tight connection between religiosity and political conservatism, we also see increasing disapproval of religious leaders' political involvement. The number of people who strongly agreed that "religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections" increased from 30 percent in 1991 to 37 percent in 1998, and it increased again to 44 percent in 2008. The number who strongly agreed that "religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions" increased from 22 percent in 1991 to 31 percent in 1998 and to 38 percent in 2008. Are these trends related to the increasingly tight connection between religiosity and political conservatism? Was public appreciation of religion dampened by 1990s political activism that was explicitly proclaimed, and sometimes celebrated, as religiously motivated? We cannot be sure. Still, it seems clear that the American public has become less enamored of at least some kinds of explicit religious involvement in the public sphere.

Trend 8: Increasing Diffuse Spirituality

The "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon in American society is well known, but it should not be exaggerated. The vast majority of people—approximately 80 percent—describe themselves as *both* spiritual and religious. Still, a small but growing minority of Americans describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. In 1998, 9 percent of GSS respondents described themselves as at least moderately spiritual but not more than slightly religious. That number rose to 14 percent in 2008. This increase is not because people are less likely to say they are religious. It is because nonreligious people are increasingly likely to say they are spiritual. And this trend is more pronounced among younger people. Almost one in five people under 40 now describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, up from about one in ten in 1998. If what people mean when they say they are spiritual but not religious is that they are generally concerned with spiritual matters but they are not interested in organized religion, then there seems to be a small but growing minority of the population whose spiritual inclinations do not lead them to become involved in conventional religious organizations.

On a similar note, there is an increase in the number of people

who say they believe in life after death, but that increase has occurred especially among Jews and among those who say they have no religion. Putting this all together—increasing interest in spirituality among the nonreligious, and increase in belief in the afterlife among Jews and among the less religious—it seems that there is a small but noticeable increase in a generic and diffuse spirituality.

Before I shift to trends within congregations, let me offer a way to summarize what we have seen so far: *no indicator of traditional religious belief or practice is going up*. There is much continuity, there is some decline, there are shifting fortunes for liberal and conservative Protestant denominations, and there is a tighter connection between religious service attendance and political, social, and religious conservatism. There is more diffuse spirituality, but this diffuse spirituality should not be mistaken for an increase in traditional religiosity. On the contrary, every indicator of traditional religiosity is either stable or declining. Increasing spirituality may provide a growing market for certain kinds of religious products, such as self-help books with spiritual themes, but even if it continues to rise it probably will not provide a solid foundation for new kinds of religious institutions or new forms of religious collective action.

Let me turn now to trends among congregations. I will mention five.

Trend 9: More Technology

The first congregational change I want to highlight is the increasing use of computer technology. Of everything that we measured in the National Congregations Study (NCS), far and away what changed the most is the use of computer technology by congregations. The number of congregations with websites increased from 17 percent in 1998 to 44 percent in 2006-07. The number using email to communicate with members increased from 21 percent to 59 percent. And the number using visual projection equipment in their main worship service increased from 12 percent to 27 percent. These are very large increases. They imply, for example, that each year since 1998 another 10,000 congregations created a web site. Seventy-four percent of churchgoers are now in congregations with websites, 79 percent are in congregations that communicate with members via email, and 32 percent are in congregations using visual projection equipment in the main worship service.

It is not surprising that congregations, like everyone else, are embracing these new technologies. I expect these numbers to climb even higher in the coming years, probably reaching the saturation point before too long. The important question here is not whether congregations will continue to embrace the latest information technology—they will—but how the technology will shape congregations. Will it make congregations more efficient and effective, or will it impose new costs without providing clear benefits? Will it change how people choose congregations? Will it change how congregations operate? It is too soon to answer these questions definitively.

Trend 10: More Informal Worship

Increased informality in worship is another congregational trend evident since 1998. More worship contains drums, jumping or shouting or dancing, raising hands in praise, applause, calling out amen, and, again, visual projection equipment. This trend towards informality is not occurring at the same pace and in the same way within every religious group. Still, there is a fairly general trend here, probably reflecting a broader trend in American culture towards informality. People dress more informally than they once did at work and social events as well as at worship services. When talking with each other, even with people we do not know well, we are less likely to use titles like Mr., Mrs., Doctor, Professor or, for that matter, Reverend, Pastor, Father, or Rabbi. We are more likely to use first names, or even nicknames, even when children address adults. It makes sense that worship within an increasingly informal culture would become increasingly informal.

Trend 11: Aging Clergy and Congregations

The increasing number of second-career clergy, the increasing age of seminarians, and a decline in the number of young people going into the ministry, are combining to shift the demographics of the American pastorate. The median age of head clergy in American congregations increased from 48 in 1998 to 53 in 2006—the average head clergyperson is 5 years older now than in 1998. By way of comparison, the average age of the 25-years-and-older American public has gone up 1 year since 1998, from 47.5 to 48.5. And the percent of people in congregations led by someone under 50 has declined from 48 to 39 percent since

1998. This aging is happening across the religious spectrum, though it's happening faster for Catholics and mainline Protestant congregations than for others. It is worth pondering what this demographic shift may imply about the changing status of the clergy, the changing nature of this occupation, the changing relationship between pastors and people, and the changing place of congregations and congregational leaders in people's lives.

People in the pews also are getting older. Older people long have been over-represented in American congregations, but this over-representation has been exacerbated lately. In the 1970s, frequent church attendees were about 3 years older, on average, than the general population; today they are about 5 years older. People are living longer, and the U.S. adult population as a whole has grown older during this period, but the churchgoing population has aged even faster. The average churchgoing adult in the United States is now 50 years old.

Trend 12: Increasing Ethnic Diversity

Congregations have become more ethnically and racially diverse even since 1998, but in a particular sort of way. There is no increase in what we might call deeply diverse congregations, meaning congregations that have, say, equal numbers of blacks and whites, or a relatively equal mix of black, whites, and Asians, or even a sizeable proportion of African Americans or Latinos in a predominantly non-Latino, white congregation. There is, however, a significant increase in the presence of *some* minorities in predominantly white congregations. Among congregations that are at least 90 percent white, 36 percent now have at least some African American attendees (up from 27 percent in 1998), 32 percent now have at least some Latinos (up from 24 percent), and 20 percent now have some Asians (up from 17 percent). A majority of those who attend predominantly white congregations now attend congregations with at least some African Americans and Hispanics in the pews. Fewer congregations, in other words, are 100 percent white and non-Hispanic. In 1998, 20 percent of church attendees were in congregations that were completely white and non-Hispanic; in 2006-07, only 14 percent were.

This increased diversity is partly driven by recent immigration, but there also is more African American presence in white congregations, so immigration is not the whole story. Increasing interracial marriage

also contributes to increasing ethnic diversity within congregations. Increasing educational attainment among African Americans also contributes to this trend because highly educated people are more likely to be attracted to the worship styles (and shorter services) more typically found in predominantly white churches.

I do not want to overstate the significance of this trend. It certainly is too soon to discard the old saying that 11 a.m. Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week. The vast majority of American congregations remain overwhelmingly white or black or Hispanic or Asian or whatever—but there also has been noticeable change in a positive direction.

Trend 13: Increasing Concentration of People in the Largest Churches.[7]

The final congregational trend I want to describe concerns size. Most congregations are small, but most people are in large congregations. The median church has fewer than 100 regular participants, but the median churchgoer is in a congregation with 400 regular participants. Even though there are relatively few large congregations, these large congregations contain a disproportionate share of the churchgoing population. The biggest one percent of Protestant churches, for example, contains approximately 15 percent of all the people, money, and staff. The biggest 10 percent contains half of all the people, money, and staff. People and resources are heavily concentrated in the biggest churches. This has been true of American religion for a long time, but there is a new twist: religious concentration is intensifying. Beginning in the 1970s, more and more people are concentrated in the very largest congregations.

The most obvious sign of this trend is the increasing number of very large Protestant churches across the country, but this trend goes beyond proliferating megachurches. Data limitations make it difficult to assess whether or not this is happening within American Catholicism—and it does not seem to be happening among synagogues. But across the Protestant spectrum people are increasingly concentrated in the very largest churches. This might not be surprising for denominations that grew since the 1970s such as the Southern Baptist Convention or the Assemblies of God, but the same trend also is evident in declining denominations such as the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran

Church in America, and the United Methodist Church, among others. Denominations vary in how concentrated they are, but all of them—small or large, conservative or liberal, growing or declining—show the same trend towards increasing concentration since about 1970.

Explaining this concentration trend is more difficult than establishing it. As I noted earlier, religious service attendance has not increased since 1970, so concentration has not increased because megachurches have figured out how to attract the unchurched. Suburbanization surely is part of the story, but American society became steadily suburbanized throughout the twentieth century, with the fastest suburbanization occurring between 1945 and 1970, whereas the religious concentration trend began rather suddenly after 1970. Cultural, economic, and technological changes all may play a role, but it is difficult to say definitively what is behind this trend. Whatever is driving it, the movement of people into the largest congregations represents a significant change in American religion's social organization.

There is more that could be said about these 13 trends, and there are other religious trends besides these. But I will stop here and leave you with the challenge to ponder these trends' implications for the profession of social work and for the integration of religious life and social work practice. ❖

Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all numbers mentioned here are from the GSS or the NCS, and all percentages or mean differences to which I call attention are statistically significant at least at the 0.05 level. See the GSS and NCS websites for more information about these surveys: www.norc.org/GSS+Website and www.soc.duke.edu/natcong. For information about other religious trends and more detail about the trends I describe here, see Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

2. The 1957 number is from "Religion Reported by the Civilian Population of the United States: March 1957," *Current Population Reports: Population Characteristics*. Series P-20, no. 79, released February 2 (United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1958).

3. Most of the facts in this paragraph are from Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout, *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), pp. 192, 200, and note 341 on p. 41. The Muncie numbers are originally from Theodore

Caplow, Howard M. Bahr, Bruce A. Chadwick, and Dwight W. Hoover, *All Faithful People: Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983). The 70 percent figure is from a 2007 survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; the other numbers are from Gallup polls.

4. Overstated attendance was first documented in C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, and Mark Chaves, "What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance," *American Sociological Review* 58 (1993): 741-752. Many subsequent studies have confirmed it.

5. The college freshman trend is from John H. Pryor, Sylvia Hurtado, Victor B. Saenz, Jose Luis Santos, and William S. Korn, *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends, 1966-2006* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, 2007). The nineteenth century numbers are from Bailey B. Burritt, *Professional Distribution of College and University Graduates*, United States Bureau of Education, Bulletin No. 19, Whole Number 491 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912), pp. 74-75. Burritt drew on alumni catalogs from 37 colleges and universities.

6. The increasingly tight connection between religious service attendance and political conservatism has been extensively analyzed by political scientists. See, for example, Morris P. Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America, 2nd Ed.* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), and Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), Ch 11.

7. The discussion of this trend is based on my research on concentration within American religion. For more details about that research, see Mark Chaves, "All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context," *Review of Religious Research* 47 (2006): 329-346.

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