

The Decline of American Religion?

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In the summer of 2011, Princeton University Press will publish my book on recent trends in American religion. Until recently, the manuscript's working title was rather bland: *Continuity and Change in American Religion*.

As we entered the copyediting phase of producing this book, Princeton's marketing team suggested changing the title to *The Decline of American Religion*. That title was catchier and seemed likely to attract more attention.

The suggested new title was not an attempt to sell more books by sensationally misrepresenting its contents. On the contrary, the marketers thought it more accurately reflected what the book was about. They pointed out that my summary of the book — no indicator of traditional religious belief or practice is increasing — was only a half-step away from saying "decline." The book shows that every indicator of traditional religiosity is either stable or declining, and there isn't enough new nontraditional religious practice to balance the decline.

If some things are stable, other things are declining, and nothing is increasing, doesn't that point to decline? Then why not say so in the title?

The proposed title change made me think more about how to interpret the religious trends described in the book. Do they, indeed, add up to decline? I have come to the conclusion that they do.

In this essay, I review some of the evidence that led me to that conclusion, and I discuss what it means for future research on this subject. Unless otherwise noted, all numbers I use are from the General Social Survey (GSS).¹

Evidence of Religious Decline

There's a lot of stability in American religiosity. The range of religious beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and practices that show continuity rather than change is impressive. The percentages of Americans who *know*

¹ The GSS is an in-person survey of the American adult population that has been conducted at least every other year since 1972. See the GSS website for more information:

www.norc.org/GSS+Website. Unless otherwise noted, all percentage or mean differences to which I call attention are statistically significant at least at the 0.05 level.

that God exists (64 percent), say they've had a born-again experience (36 percent), and who pray several times a week (69 percent) have remained steady since the 1980s.²

The percentages of individuals who read the Bible at least weekly (31 percent), watch religious television (28 percent), feel extremely close to God (31 percent), consider themselves very or extremely religious (26 percent), or believe in heaven (86 percent) or hell (73 percent) haven't changed much during the 7-to-17-year periods over which they were measured by the GSS. There is much continuity, then, in Americans' 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's tempting to treat any signs of change as mere footnotes to the main story of continuity. But American religion has changed in recent decades. It's important to clarify what's changing and what's staying the same. We should not overstate change. At the same time, we also should not allow the considerable continuity in American religion to blind us to change.

For example:

The proportion of Americans who say that they have no religious affiliation has increased. This is a long-term trend, but the pace of change quickened in the 1990s. In 1957, three percent of Americans said they had no religious affiliation. By 2008, the percentage had increased to 17 percent.³ This trend has received much media attention.

Involvement in religious congregations, which mainly means attendance at worship services, is softening. Religious service attendance is the most studied and debated trend in American religion. The bottom

² The percentages in this paragraph are calculated by averaging across the survey years in which each item was included.

³ 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).

line is that worship attendance isn't increasing, but reasonable people can disagree about whether the overall attendance trend in recent decades is stable or slightly down. The most prudent conclusion is that attendance declined markedly from the 1950s to 1990. It's 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 striking, however, are the generational differences in childhood religious socialization. More recently born individuals are more 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 declined 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, involvement in American religious congregations has softened over recent decades. Aggregate weekly attendance at worship services is either stable or very slowly declining since 1990, but it clearly 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.

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. Subsequent studies have confirmed it.

None of this decline is happening fast, and levels of religious involvement in the United States continue to remain very high by world standards. But the signs of decline are unmistakable.

There also is a long-term, 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.

I would place this trend next to another well-known trend that I think is related to it: 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 candidate 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.⁵

⁵ Most of the facts in this paragraph about increasing religious tolerance 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

Combining the declining belief in biblical inerrancy with the fact that individual Americans have become increasingly tolerant, even appreciative, of religions other than their own, we might say that even in the midst of high levels of religious belief and practice in society, there's declining confidence in the special status of one's own religion.

There also is declining confidence in religious leaders. The percentage of people who say that they have a great deal of confidence in leaders of religious institutions has declined from about 35 percent in the 1970s to about 25 percent today.

This declining confidence is not unique to religion. 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 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.

Relatedly, 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

figure is from a 2007 survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; the other numbers are from Gallup polls.

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 1900.⁶

These declines in traditional religiosity and traditional religious organizations are not offset by increasing vitality elsewhere. The “spiritual but not religious” phenomenon, for example, is well known and growing, 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, nine 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.

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.

Relatedly, there's 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. I interpret this as an increase in diffuse spirituality rather than in traditional religious belief because the largest increases in belief

⁶ 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.

in the afterlife are among the least religious Americans and among subgroups who have not traditionally emphasized an afterlife.

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. But this increase is unlikely to re-energize existing religious institutions. Nor will it provide a solid foundation for new kinds of religious institutions or new forms of religious collective action. Increasing spirituality may provide a growing market for certain kinds of religious products, such as self-help books with spiritual themes, but it probably will not find a stable, socially and politically significant organizational expression. It is too vague, unfocused, and anti-institutional for that. It is best seen as one aspect of Americans' overall softening involvement in traditional religion, and as part and parcel of a growing skepticism in American society about the value of organizations and institutions in many spheres of life, including religion.

There is one more trend I want to mention. I have saved this trend for last because it is the one that is most likely to surprise even people who track trends in American. It also is the trend that leads most directly to the reflections I want to offer about future research on religious trends. I refer to the fact that there is a small but unmistakable decline even in belief in God.

Averaging GSS data between 1988 and 2008, 93 percent of people say they believe in God or a higher power. This percentage remains essentially constant and very high over the 20 years it has been measured in the GSS. This very high and remarkably stable level of belief in God is well known. But a longer view shows something different.

Tom W. Smith has combined various surveys to show that, in the 1950s, 99 percent of Americans said they believed in God, and that number has dropped, slowly but steadily, to stand at 92 percent in 2008. This is a small decline that is stretched out over five decades, and after five decades of change nearly everyone still says they believe in God or a higher power.

Still, change has occurred. It has occurred so slowly that it is difficult to see over even a two decade span, but combining multiple surveys over a longer period of time shows real decline. The percentage of

Americans who say they are *certain* that God exists similarly looks stable over the 20 years it has been measured in the GSS but shows decline if we combine multiple surveys conducted over a longer period of time.⁷

There are other trends in American religion, but none that contradict my basic conclusion that *no indicator of traditional religious belief or practice is going up*. 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. This is why I think it is reasonable to conclude that American religion has in fact declined in recent decades — slowly, but unmistakably.

What Does This Mean for Research on American Religious Trends?

I concluded the previous section with Tom Smith's demonstration that even belief in God has declined among Americans because it impressively illustrates how building a bigger telescope sharpens our vision. Roughly speaking, belief in God has declined since 1955 at a rate of about 1/10 of a percentage point per year, or *1 percentage point per decade*. This change is so slow that it was not visible until we were able to combine dozens of surveys, each with thousands of respondents, over five decades.

More generally, I think we have been reluctant to conclude that American religiosity has declined in recent decades because the available evidence simply did not support such a conclusion. Even two or three decades worth of data did not provide a powerful enough lens to pick out the signal of decline from the noise of yearly fluctuations. But we have more data with each passing year, and we now have enough data over a long enough time span to pick up the signal of decline that has been there all along but was not clearly visible until relatively recently. The declining belief in God becomes compelling only when we look over five decades.

There is of course nothing magical about having five decades of trend data rather than two or three or four. Some changes, such as the increasing percentage of people who say they have no religion, are quite visible

⁷ Tom W. Smith, "Religious Change Around the World," General Social Survey Cross-National Report No. 30 (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2009), p. 3 and table 2, p. 3 and table 2.

with just ten years of data. But other changes — such as declining belief in God — have occurred too slowly to see without many more years of data.

The general point I want to make here is that we now have enough data on enough indicators over long enough periods of time to see a trend that we could not see before. To put this another way, available evidence has passed a tipping point beyond which we can confidently conclude that American religiosity has indeed declined in the last several decades.

Watching religious trends over a longish time period is necessary because several key American religious trends are slow-moving — even glacial. But slow-moving does not mean unimportant, and long-term, slow social change can be profound social change. The building of ever longer high-quality time series now allows us to see change that we could not see before, and a high priority for future research should be to continue to construct time series from existing data where we can, combine data from multiple sources where appropriate, and continue to gather data that extends high quality time series into the future. This is how we make our telescopes more powerful, and this is one sure path to important new discoveries about American religion.

A second reflection: Since the evidence for a decades-long decline in American religiosity is now incontrovertible — like the evidence for global warming it comes from multiple sources, shows up in several dimensions, and paints a consistent factual picture — the burden of proof has shifted to those who want to claim that American religiosity is not declining.

Times can change, of course, and trends can reverse, which is another reason we should continue to monitor the indicators we have been monitoring for decades. In the meantime, however, if someone wants to claim that traditional American religiosity has not declined, or that there is a compensating increase somewhere else in the religious landscape, they should be required to generate the relevant evidence. In the meantime, the background assumption should be that we are in a time of slow but steady decline.

A third reflection: Until now, I have not used the word “secularization.” I think we have shied away from the difficult but necessary work of documenting religious trends in part because we have tired of interminable debates about secularization. But it is a mistake to let our weariness of secularization debates keep us from tracking religious trends.

We sometimes have engaged in debates about secularization without knowing enough about the facts of the matter, but it eventually will be the facts of the matter that settle these debates. We know a lot more today

about religious trends than we did even ten or twenty years ago. We already know enough to settle some pieces of the secularization debate. We know, for example, that religiosity is not necessarily extinguished by industrialization, urbanization, or scientific knowledge.

But it might take decades until we know enough to settle other pieces of the debate, for example whether the United States constitutes an exception to the European pattern of declining religiosity or whether it is following a similar trajectory but at a (much) slower pace. Settling this and other issues may take decades because we need to learn more from existing data about the nature of past trends, but also because, more importantly, we need to watch the trends into the future.

My final reflection, which makes explicit a theme that is implicit throughout this essay, is that accurately measuring and describing a significant trend makes an important contribution to knowledge whether or not it contributes to theory.⁸ In saying this, I take inspiration from the Keeling Curve, which is the simple trend line, running from 1958 to the present, showing increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.⁹

The Keeling Curve is named after Charles David Keeling, the scientist who developed an accurate way to measure carbon dioxide in the air, and who first began to track it. The Keeling Curve certainly is a significant trend, but its scientific significance does not depend on its contribution to the theory of the atmosphere. Indeed, scientists have known since the 19th century that carbon dioxide traps heat on the earth, and the Keeling Curve by itself does not establish causal connections between burning fossil fuel, carbon dioxide levels, and global warming. Its fundamental scientific importance lies in the fact that it establishes a simple significant trend as incontrovertible fact, not in its contribution to theory.

There also are social science examples of trends whose significance no one would deny. Increasing participation of married women in the labor force, movement of people from rural areas to cities, and, more recently, increasing income and wealth inequality in the United States, all come to mind as significant trends established by social scientists. Like the Keeling curve, the significance of these trends rests on what they

⁸ By “theory” I mean knowledge of causal connections and processes.

⁹ I draw the facts in this paragraph from Justin Gillis’s article, “A Scientist, His Work and a Climate Reckoning,” *New York Times*, 22 December 2010, beginning on p. A1.

contribute to our factual knowledge, not on what they contribute to theory. Indeed, all of these trends are recognized as significant more because of what we already know about causal connections than because of what new they tell us about causal connections.

Of course, we can concentrate on establishing significant social facts only if we can tell the difference between significant and trivial facts. Put another way, we can concentrate on answering important questions only if we can tell the difference between significant and trivial questions. There is more than one way for a fact or a question to achieve significance, but one strong clue that a fact we are trying to establish is significant is that people we care about communicating with consider it so.

Similarly, a strong clue that a question we are investigating is significant is that people we care about communicating with want to know the answer to it. By this standard, the question, “Is American religion declining?” is significant on its face, as is the claim that it is indeed declining. The same cannot be said of all the research questions we pursue or all the claims we aim to establish. This is another reason that measuring and describing religious trends, including investigating details such as subgroup differences in key trends, should be a high priority for the social scientific study of religion.

The value of trying to answer a significant question is not the only reason that documenting and investigating religious trends should be a high priority. Another reason is that this is something we know how to do well. To paraphrase a point that James Davis made in 1994 about sociology in general, the sociology of religion’s greatest strength and biggest comparative advantage over other ways of studying religion is our relatively solid factual base and our ability to expand that base. When we criticize research for making no theoretical contribution, we are undervaluing our factual base and our ability to expand it while overvaluing activities at which we are relatively weak: the development of new concepts, propositions, and theory.¹⁰

¹⁰ James A. Davis, “What’s Wrong with Sociology?” *Sociological Forum* 9 (1994): 179-197, especially p. 184. I am paraphrasing Davis’s endorsement of a point that James L. Price made in 1969 about introductory sociology textbooks: “The feature of contemporary sociology that is perhaps its point of greatest strength – its relatively solid factual base – is underrepresented in introductory sociology textbooks and anthologies, whereas the features of relative

Documenting religious trends should be a high priority for social scientists of religion because such work clearly addresses a significant question *and* because it is something we do well. It is work that is both doable and worth doing.¹¹

In the end, I decided not to call my book *The Decline of American Religion* because the book documents and discusses several important religious trends – such as increasing religious diversity, increasing ethnic diversity within churches, and increasing polarization – that are not relevant to an assessment of decline. Every indicator of traditional religiosity for which change reasonably could be interpreted as decline is either declining or stable, and if the book focused only on those indicators I would have changed the title. But I decided that a book that includes discussion of religious trends that are neither here nor there when it comes to the question of decline should not have “decline” in the title. So, bland or not, it will be called *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*.

weakness – its concepts, propositions, and theory – are overrepresented.” This is from p. iii of James L. Price, *Social Facts: Introductory Readings* (New York: MacMillan, 1969).

¹¹ Sometimes what critics mean when they say that work makes no theoretical contribution is that they do not find the work to be significant. It is legitimate and necessary to judge a work’s significance, and making an important theoretical contribution is one way for work to achieve significance. But not all theoretical contributions are significant, and work can be significant without making a theoretical contribution. We should not use “theoretical contribution” as a synonym or substitute for “significant contribution.” Significance, not theoretical contribution, should be the primary criterion for assessing work.