

Religion Is Dying? Don't Believe It

By Byron R. Johnson and Jeff Levin

Reports of religion's decline in America have been exaggerated. You've heard the story: Churchgoers are dwindling in number while "Nones"—those who tell pollsters they have no religious affiliation—are multiplying as people abandon their faith and join the ranks of atheists and agnostics. Headlines declare that the U.S. is secularizing along the lines of Europe. From Britain's Daily Mail in 2013: "Religion could disappear by 2041 because people will have replaced God with possessions, claims leading psychologist."

These conclusions are based on analyses that are so flawed as to be close to worthless. In a new [study](#) with our colleagues Matt Bradshaw and Rodney Stark, we seek to set the record straight.

Data from five recent U.S. population surveys point to the vibrancy, ubiquity and growth of religion in the U.S. Americans are becoming more religious, and religious institutions are thriving. Consistent with some previous studies but contrary to widely held assumptions, many people who report no religious affiliation—and even many self-identified atheists and agnostics—exhibit substantial levels of religious practice and belief.

(Our sources are the University of Chicago's 2018 General Social Survey, Baylor's 2017 Values and Beliefs of the American Public Survey, the Association of Religious Data Archives' 2012 Portrait of American Life Study, the 2017-2020 World Values Survey and the 2018 Chapman University Survey of American Fears.)

The religious landscape in the U.S. is changing but not in the ways that draw headlines. Hundreds of new denominations have quietly appeared, as have thousands of church plants (new congregations) and numerous non-Christian religious imports. These more than make up for losses from mainline Protestant denominations, which are indeed in free fall and have been for decades. But the decline of established institutions is easier to track than the formation and growth of new ones.

Adherents of these new denominations and congregations might be classified as "Others," along with members of the burgeoning Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist communities throughout the U.S. and the *baal t'shuvah* movement among young formerly secular Jews turning to Orthodox observance.

But large databases on American religion often lump Others in with the Nones. Respondents who don't see their faith or denomination listed check off the only remaining option, "none of the above." The error extends to the counting of religious institutions. The U.S. Religious Census, organized by the Association of

Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, tracks the number of congregations and congregants at the county level. But recent research in three U.S. counties confirms that it has missed between 26% and 40% of their congregations. Many are evangelical and Pentecostal churches, especially Latino and African-American congregations, as well as nondenominational churches and megachurches, many with multiple campuses. This means that instead of 344,894 congregations (based on the most recent U.S. Religious Census data), there may be as many as 500,000 houses of worship in the U.S. Omitted are not only thousands of small congregations but huge ones such as Lakewood Church in Houston (with weekly attendance of 45,000), Gateway Church in the Dallas area (100,000), North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Ga. (40,000), Life Church in Edmund, Okla. (30,000), and Christ's Church of the Valley in Phoenix (32,000). All of this helps explain why the proportion of Nones has increased sharply—from 15% in 2007 to 30% in 2021—even though the proportion of atheists in the U.S. has held steady at 3% to 4% for more than 80 years. And there are reasons to question the assumption that even truly unaffiliated Nones aren't religious. Our study looked closely at their actual practices and beliefs.

According to the 2018 General Social Survey, 6.4% of self-described atheists and 27.2% of agnostics attended religious services monthly or more; 12.8% and 58.1%, respectively, prayed at least weekly; 19.2% and 75% believed in life after death; and 7.3% and 23.3% reported having had a religious experience.

Religion is constantly evolving, but it isn't in decline in the U.S. More Americans attend and support more religious congregations than ever before. Social scientists can't count them unless they know where to look.

Mr. Johnson is a professor of social sciences at Baylor University, where Mr. Levin is a professor of epidemiology and population health.