Copyrighted Material

1 | Introduction

By world standards, the United States is a highly religious country. Almost all Americans say they believe in God, a majority say they pray, and more than a third say they attend religious services every week. Some skepticism is appropriate here. It is not always clear what people mean when they say they believe in God or pray, and many people believe in a God that is quite untraditional. Moreover, people do not really go to church as often as they tell pollsters that they go. But even when we take all this into account, Americans still are more pious than people in any Western country, with the possible exception of Ireland.[1]

We cannot say anything definitive about very long-term trends in U.S. religious beliefs and practices because high-

Copyrighted Material

quality national surveys do not exist before the middle of the twentieth century. Still, historical studies of local communities suggest that today's relatively high levels of religiosity have characterized American society from its beginnings. Brooks Holifield, a prominent historian of American religion, put it this way: "For most of the past three hundred years, from 35 to 40 percent of the population has probably participated in congregations with some degree of regularity."[2] The weekly religious service attendance rate implied by the best national survey in 2008 is within that range: 37 percent. This overstates true weekly attendance because people say that they attend services more often than they really do, but it probably represents fairly the proportion of Americans who participate in congregations more or less regularly. The continuity is striking.

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. As we will see, 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

Copyrighted Material

religion to blind us to the real change that has occurred and is occurring. I will try to strike the right balance between the twin dangers of overstating and understating recent changes in American religion.

Some of the trends I highlight in this book are well known. Others are not. This book documents even the well-known trends in order to provide a stand-alone summary of important religious change in the United States.[3] I seek to summarize the key big-picture changes in American religion since 1972. I will describe rather than explain, and I will focus on aggregate national change rather than differences among subgroups. I do not try to document all the interesting differences between, say, men and women, blacks and whites, Christians and Jews, northerners and southerners, liberals and conservatives, or other subgroups of U.S. residents. I offer no overarching theory or major reinterpretation. I occasionally will comment on variations across subgroups of Americans, but only when knowing about such differences is important to understanding the aggregate picture. I occasionally will mention explanations of the trends, but only when a straightforward and well-established explanation exists. This book is for those who do not know, but who want to know, in broad brush, what is changing and what is not in American religion. Those who want to dig deeper can follow the notes to additional reading. My

Copyrighted Material

goal is to provide key facts so those who wish to discuss, explain, or debate the state of American religion over the past few decades can do so knowledgeably.

I keep this book descriptive and aggregate because I want to keep it short. I want to keep it short because I believe this sort of factual summary should be available to the general public. Too often, we develop explanations and interpretations before we are clear about what the facts are. Too often, people interested in basic facts about American religion have to search harder than they should to find an overview they can trust. Too often, teachers who want their students to learn basic facts about American religious change cannot find a source that is inexpensive enough, and short enough, to assign in class. I wanted to keep this book short so that it can inform the maximum number of people about what's changing and what's not in American religion. For the same reason, I have erred on the side of including less rather than more methodological detail.

The trends I highlight are not the only important trends in American religion, but they are the most interesting and best documented. "Best documented" is an important qualifier. I will draw primarily on the two best sources of information about these trends. 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 GSS, conducted by the National Opinion Research Cen-

Copyrighted Material

ter at the University of Chicago, is by far the best source of available information about continuity and change in Americans' religiosity over the last four decades. Of course, no survey is perfect. The GSS's primary limitation is that, while richly informative, it has not asked people about every religious belief, attitude, or practice we might like to know about. But no other high-quality source contains as much information about American religion over as many years, so describing the best documented trends means relying primarily on the GSS.

The other primary source I will use heavily 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 2006–7 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. 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.[4]

Before I launch into the trends, I want to document the remarkable continuity in American religiosity between 1972 and 2008.[5] Table 1.1 displays more than two dozen religious practices, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. It gives the number of GSS surveys on which each question was asked, the first and last years in which the question was asked, the total number of survey respondents who answered the

Copyrighted Material

Table 1.1 Continuity in American Religion, 1972–2008

	Pooled %	(N)	Years Spanned	# Surveys
Practice/Behavior/Experience				
Attended Sunday school most of the time or regularly at 16	71	2,911	1988–1998	2
Prays at least several times/week	69	24,145	1983–2008	16
Has tried to convince others to accept Jesus Christ	44	7,881	1988–2008	4
Has had a "born again" experience	36	10,487	1988–2008	6
Reads the Bible at least once a week	31	2,910	1988–1998	2
Watches some religious television each week	28	2,926	1988–1998	2
Beliefs and Attitudes				
Believes in God or a higher power	93	12,998	1988–2008	8
Believes in God now and always has	87	4,287	1991–2008	4
Probably or definitely believes in heaven	86	3,713	1991–2008	3
Probably or definitely believes in miracles	77	3,645	1991–2008	3
Birth of a child has strengthened religious faith	75	2,780	1988–1998	2
Probably or definitely believes in hell	73	3,657	1991–2008	3
Agrees that God concerns Himself with human beings personally	73	3,766	1991–2008	3
Believing in God without doubt highly important for being a good Christian or Jew	73	2,870	1988–1998	2

Copyrighted Material

	Pooled %	(N)	Years Spanned	# Surveys
Death in the family has strengthened religious faith	68	2,772	1988–1998	2
Knows God exists and has no doubts	64	12,998	1988–2008	8
Following one's conscience, even if against church/synagogue teachings, highly important for being a good Christian or Jew	62	2,791	1988–1998	2
Following the teaching of one's church/synagogue highly important for being a good Christian or Jew	55	2,861	1988–1998	2
Evil in the world has never caused doubts about religious faith	53	2,829	1988–1998	2
Personal suffering has never caused doubts about religious faith	49	2,833	1988–1998	2
Agrees that life is meaningful only because God exists	46	3,754	1991–2008	3
Attending services regularly highly important for being a good Christian or Jew	44	2,863	1988–1998	2
Has had a turning point when made new commitment to religion	43	8,836	1991–2008	5
Describes self as having strong religious affiliation	38	48,127	1974–2008	25
Feels extremely close to God	31	10,009	1983–1991	7
Describes self as extremely or very religious	26	3,863	1991–2008	3
Thinks that churches and religious organizations have too much power	23	2,267	1991–1998	2

Source: General Social Survey. The widest 95% confidence interval for any of these percentages is +/− 2 percentage points.

Copyrighted Material

question over the years, and, most important, the percentage of respondents, pooled across all the years, who answered in the stated way.

There is much that could be said about what the numbers in this table imply about American culture in general and American religion in particular. Some might see American optimism reflected in the fact that more people believe in heaven than in hell. Others might see American individualism reflected in the fact that more people think that God is concerned about human beings personally than say that they know God exists, or in the fact that following one's conscience ranks higher than following the teachings of one's religion on the list of what it means to be a good Christian or Jew. What I want to emphasize, however, is that these items all share the remarkable characteristic that none of them has changed much in recent decades.

There is judgment involved in deciding what counts as stability and what counts as change. Does the three-point difference between, say, the 65 percent of people who said in 1994 that they know God exists and the 62 percent who said so in 2008 represent stability or a small decline? Does the four-point difference between the 74 percent of people who said in 1991 that they believe in miracles and the 78 percent who said so in 2008 represent stability or a small increase? "Statistical significance" is not enough of a guide, since even trivial differences can be statistically significant

Copyrighted Material

if the samples are large enough. Generally, I will call something a trend only if change is evident over more than two survey years, if several similar items trend in the same direction, or if there is corroborating evidence from other sources. Even a relatively large percentage-point difference on an isolated item measured at just two points in time seems too flimsy a basis for declaring a trend, so when I have only two data points, as with the NCS, the other criteria for judging something a real change—several similar items trending in the same direction and independent corroboration—take on greater weight.

None of the items listed in table 1.1 changed consistently enough to constitute a trend. This is why it makes sense to average the percentages across the various surveys. If I showed you each of these numbers for each year in which each question was asked, you would see much more detail, but it would be difficult to see the forest for the trees. On each of these religious behaviors, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes, continuity trumps change between 1972 and 2008.

The range of beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and practices that remain unchanged is impressive. The percentages of Americans who know God exists (64 percent), who have 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

Copyrighted Material

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) did not change notably during the periods over which they were measured.

It bears repeating that, by world standards, Americans remain remarkably religious in both belief and practice. The trends I describe in the pages that follow should be seen against the backdrop of these continuing high levels of religiosity. This stability should make us reluctant to overstate the amount of change in American religion, and it should make us skeptical when we hear that American religion is changing dramatically or suddenly. If you have read this far, you already know enough to be able to confidently contradict both those who say that American religiosity is experiencing a dramatic resurgence and those who say that it has declined dramatically. But this background continuity also makes the changes that are occurring stand out more than they otherwise might.

Table 1.1 focuses on the years since 1972, but it is important to recognize that some religious beliefs and practices that look essentially stable since 1972 show signs of change if we take a longer view. The most important of these is general belief in God. Averaging the data between 1988 and 2008, 93 percent of people say they believe in God or a higher power. This percentage remains essentially constant

Copyrighted Material

and very high over the twenty years it has been measured in the GSS, which is why I include it in table 1.1. But a longer view shows something different. 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. The change is so slow that it is difficult to see over a two-decade span, but combining multiple surveys over a longer period of time shows that the decline is real nonetheless. This example illustrates that my interpretive strategy and my focus on the years since 1972 make me more likely to understate than overstate change. This example also foreshadows a major summary conclusion: even in the midst of substantial continuity in American religion there are signs of change in the direction of less religion.[6]

In this book I describe American religious trends under seven headings: diversity, belief, involvement, congregations, leaders, liberal Protestant decline, and polarization. Chapter 2 documents America's increasing religious diversity, including, significantly, the increasing number of people with no religious affiliation. As we will see, it is not just the country as a whole that is more religiously diverse. Our families and friendship circles also are more religiously diverse than they were several decades ago, and this probably

Copyrighted Material

is why increasing religious diversity has been accompanied by a cultural change in the direction of greater toleration, even appreciation, of religions other than our own.

Chapter 3 is about religious belief. Here I focus on one of the few traditional religious beliefs that truly declined in recent decades: believing that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. In this chapter I also document the recent growth in what I call a diffuse spirituality, including the rising number of people, especially young people, who say that they are spiritual but not religious.

Chapter 4 focuses on religious involvement, which mainly means attendance at weekend worship services. It is more difficult than one might think to nail down the trend in worship attendance, not least because Americans systematically overstate how often they attend religious services. But we can see clearly enough to conclude that religious involvement unambiguously is not increasing. Reasonable people can disagree about whether we are in a time of stability or slow decline in involvement. All things considered, I conclude that religious involvement has softened in recent decades. In chapter 4 I explain why I put it that way.

Because attending worship services remains the most common form of religious involvement, local congregations—churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples—remain the most central kind of religious organization in American society. In chapter 5 I document six trends in congregational

Copyrighted Material

life: looser connections between congregations and denominations, more computer technology, more informal worship, older congregants, more high-income and college-educated congregants, and, what is perhaps most important, more people concentrated in very large churches. Taken together, these trends show that congregations are shaped by the same cultural, social, and economic pressures affecting American life and institutions more generally.

Chapter 6 documents several important trends concerning religious leaders. Religious leadership is a less attractive career choice for young people than it used to be. The numbers of older clergy and of female clergy are higher than they were several decades ago. And public confidence in religious leaders has declined precipitously. Public confidence in other kinds of leaders has declined as well, but confidence in religious leaders has declined more than confidence in leaders of other institutions. All things considered, religious leaders have lost ground on several fronts in recent decades.

Liberal Protestant denominations are the only major religious group to have experienced significant, sustained decline in recent decades. Chapter 7 is about that decline. This is one of the best known religious trends of the last several decades, but it often is misunderstood. Contrary to what many believe, this decline has not occurred because droves of people have been leaving more liberal denominations to

Copyrighted Material

join more conservative religious groups. Nor does the decline of liberal denominations mean that liberal religious ideas are waning. Indeed, as a set of ideas, religious liberalism steadily has gained ground in the United States, whatever the fate of the denominations most closely associated with it.

Chapter 8 describes another important trend involving religion, liberalism, and conservatism. Actively religious Americans are more politically and socially conservative than less religious Americans. Regular churchgoing, moreover, now correlates even more strongly with some types of political and social conservatism than it did several decades ago. Rather than being associated with a particular type of religion, certain kinds of political and social conservatism have become more tightly linked to religiosity itself. The most and least religiously active people are further apart attitudinally than they were several decades ago, but this trend does not warrant a declaration of culture war—yet.

In this book I describe many specific trends. There are interesting details and nuances and complexities, but an essential summary fact about recent religious trends in the United States can be stated simply: there is much continuity, and there is some decline, but *no traditional religious belief or practice has increased in recent decades*. Believing in life after death may have increased somewhat but, as we will see in chapter 3, this is better understood as part of the

Copyrighted Material

trend toward diffuse spirituality than as an increase in traditional belief. There may be specific times and places in the United States where religion looks like it is on the rise, but these should be understood as short-lived local weather patterns within a national religious climate that is in some ways holding its own and in some ways slowly declining—but clearly is not rising. All talk of increased religiosity in the United States in recent decades is baseless.

If religiosity is not increasing in the United States, why do people sometimes think it is? I will answer this question in the final chapter, where I also will offer several other concluding observations about continuity and change in American religion.