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Are secular ideas replacing religious belief in the US?

It's complicated, but it might be more accurate to say that certain markers of religious affiliation are decreasing while others are either holding steady or increasing moderately. But before we get to statistics it will be helpful to think about why this question is being asked. Scholars talk about the "secularization thesis" as the idea that, as societies become more modern, they become less religious. This idea is not universally accepted, and the US in particular presents challenges to the secularization narrative.

Because the US population is overwhelmingly either Christian (70%) or religiously unaffiliated (23%), (Pew 2014) those groups will be our focus for looking at overall trends, but religious minority groups are increasingly important in this discussion, especially religions like Islam that are predicted to grow significantly in the next few decades. Even if numerically it's still a small percentage, this trend itself challenges the idea of secularization.

By many standards, religious belief *has* declined in the US, but it has not declined evenly. For example, church attendance overall has decreased significantly in the past few decades, but the percentage of people who go to church more than once a week has stayed about the same. This suggests that, while religious belief has decreased on average, certain populations remain strongly or "intensely" religious (Schnabel, Landon, and Brock). Furthermore, strongly religious groups like Evangelicals remain influential in politics and in the broader social environment.

These observations raise the question of how religious belief is measured. Church attendance may be easy to measure, but what if people are praying at home instead? And what do we make of the religiously unaffiliated "Nones," a significant number of whom still say that spirituality rather than religion is important to them. The number of atheists and agnostics has increased, but this could be explained just as well by the decreasing stigma attached to nonbelief (Cooperman and Smith).

It is difficult to say whether secular ideas are gaining prominence over religious belief in the US, but there is enough data to show that what is going on in America is not a simple process of secularization. In the public sphere and in many people's personal lives, religious belief is still a crucially important topic. The statistical trends are strong enough to seriously compromise the simplicity of the secularization thesis, but they are not so easy to fully explain. The rise of religiously unaffiliated individuals who still say that spirituality is important to them suggests that the categories we use may need reconsideration to remain relevant, and the decline of moderate religion and average "religiosity" might reflect increasing polarization rather than a simple downward trend. Finally, there is a need to examine the narratives at play and to think critically about which questions we should be asking when simple answers are no longer satisfying. Although we can definitively say that America is not simply secularizing, the trends are complicated and will require more work to be thoroughly understood.

Bibliography

Cooperman, Alan, and Gregory A. Smith. "The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious 'Nones' in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 27 July 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/.

"Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, 9 Sept. 2020, www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/.

Schnabel, Landon, and Sean Bock. 2017. "The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research." *Sociological Science* 4: 686-700.

Further Reading

The Myth of Disenchantment by Jason Josephson Storm. University of Chicago Press 2017.

The New Metaphysicals by Courtney Bender. University of Chicago Press 2010.

About the Author

Michael Gargus is an undergraduate student in Religious Studies at Georgia State University. He was born and raised in Atlanta and recognizes the importance of religion and spirituality both to individuals and to the current political and social moment. His interests include religion in the United States and the intersection of religion and politics.