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## **Unchurched Believers: Fewer Americans Have a Religion But Religious Beliefs Haven't Changed Much**

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### **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

Americans are famously religious. European visitors from Tocqueville in 1830 to contemporary tourists have compared religion as they encountered it in the United States to that in their home country and marvelled at how “. . . the Christian religion retains greater influence over the souls of men.”<sup>1</sup> Religion’s influence, if it changed at all in the last thirty years, seems to have increased. The religious cleavage in U.S. presidential elections persists (Manza and Brooks, 1997; Greeley and Hout, 2006), invoking God in political contexts increased after 1976 (Domke and Coe, 2008), and journalists refer to the “religious right” more now than in the 1980s.

Ironically, perhaps, the strength of religion in the public sphere seems to have prompted a negative reaction in the private sphere. The percentage of American adults with no religious preference increased from 7 percent in 1988 to 17 percent in 2008.<sup>2</sup> In 2002, we reported on the increase through 2000 and concluded that, in part, the trend to no religion was a reaction by political moderates and liberals to the growing association — in their minds, at least — between organized religion and a conservative social agenda (Hout and Fischer, 2002). We inferred from patterns of attending religious services among people across the spectrum of political views that political moderates and liberals who seldom attended religious services used to answer the religion question by mentioning the religion they were raised in, but, in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1990s, they quit doing that and reported no religious affiliation instead. We also identified generational succession as an important reason why private religious identification was waning. Young

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<sup>1</sup>The original quote is from *Democracy in America*. We got this elided quote from Lipset (1963, p. 141) who leads off a section called “All-Pervasiveness, a Consistent Characteristic of American Religion” with it.

<sup>2</sup>This and all calculations here come from the General Social Survey. The religious preference question is “What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?” We restrict the age range of our calculations to 25-74 years because we find generational succession is important, and bounding the age range makes it possible for us to quantify how important it has been. We use sampling weights to adjust for oversamples of African Americans in 1982 and 1987. We also adjust for complex treatment of initial non-respondents in 2004, 2006, and 2008 and reinterviews of panel members in 2008. In a departure from the procedures in our 2002 article, we also adjust for the number of adults residing in the sample households throughout the time series (see Smith et al. (2009, App. A) for details).

people with particularly little engagement with religion were replacing the most religious cohorts in American history (those born 1905-1924), and this generational turnover pushed up the fraction of adults with no religion about three points. A rapid falloff in the propensity of people raised without religion to acquire one in adulthood increased the fraction of adults who had no religion by another percentage point.

We see two important implications of this research for the sociology of religion. The trend to no preference is the biggest shift in American religious identification in the past thirty years. American religion became far more diverse over the last one hundred years (Smith and Kim, 2005), and the emergence of a significant minority with no religion contributed as much as the redistribution of Protestants away from the mainline denominations toward conservative and evangelical ones and far more than the appearance of Islam did (Fischer and Hout, 2006, pp. 192-200). Each of these trends has an important demographic component. Immigration added to the Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhist populations. Higher than average fertility added to the growth of conservative Protestantism and Catholicism, at least through 1980 (Hout et al., 2001; Hout and Wilde, 2004). Though perceived by some as evidence of secularization (Marwell and Demerath, 2003), we reject that interpretation on the grounds that neither the modernization nor the decline of authority strains within secularization theory anticipate the important roles demography and politics played in these changes (Hout and Fischer, 2003). American religion is changing, but the changes are more complex and interesting than secularization implies or admits.

Sociology of religion also needs to attend to our political explanation of the trend away from organized religion because, if we are right, it reverses the usual perspective on cause and effect in religious politics. The conventional view is that religious identification is fixed and political preferences follow. We argue that political moderates and liberals adjusted their religious identification after advocacy by religious leaders changed the meaning of that religious identification. Patrikios (2008) follows up on this implication with some tests based on panel data. While his model does not accurately reflect the mechanism we had in mind, he is right in point out the important implication of our research for understanding that politics can be a cause of religious identification as much as religion can cause political identification and behavior.

We have four goals in this paper, each following from the conclusions we reached previously. First, we update the time series through 2008. We find less change this decade, but Americans

continue to distance themselves from organized religion. Second, we use the recent observations to improve our estimates of when the trend toward no religion started, how fast it is moving, and whether it is moving at a constant rate. We also consider the possibility that the trend may have stopped and then restarted. Third, we assess whether our explanations — politics and generations — are sufficient to account for the trend in light of new evidence. Fourth, we explore other indicators of a backlash against organized religion in data about the public perception of the role of religion in society and politics.

## Updating the Time Series

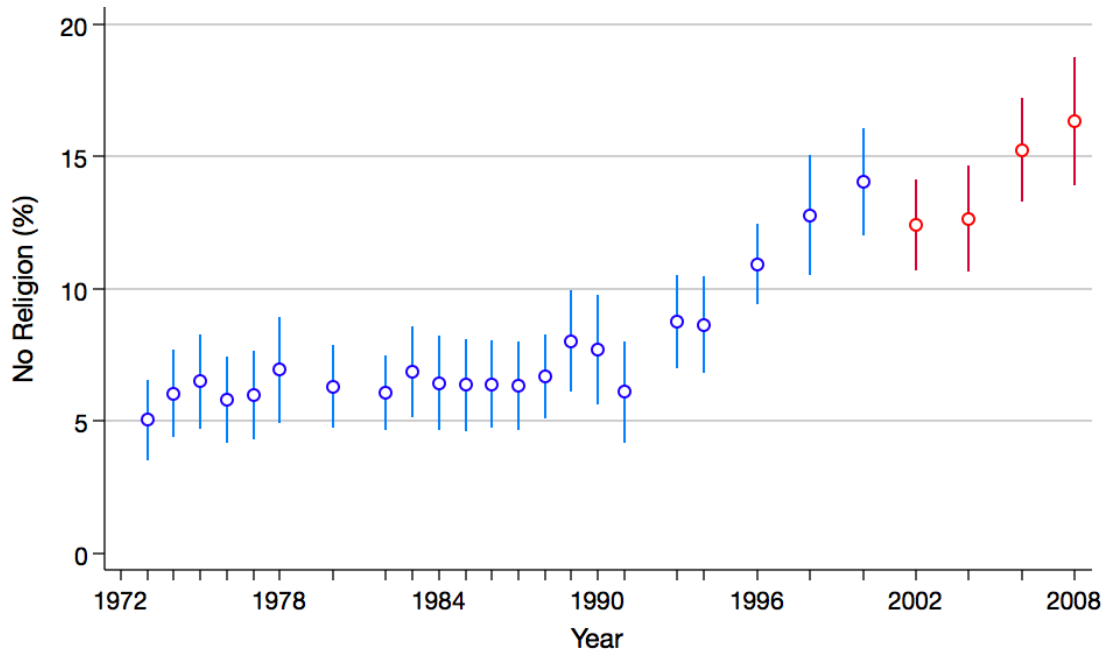
Our demographic and political hypotheses predict that the percentage of Americans who prefer no religion would continue to increase during the current decade. The march of time continues the demographic replacement of deceased members from the exceptionally religious cohorts born before 1920 with less religious young people. And the policies and rhetoric of the George W. Bush administration did nothing to break the association between religion and the conservative social agenda in popular discussions. So, all else being equal, both demographic change and the political climate should contribute to further increases in the fraction of adults with no religious preference.

Our original analysis used the General Social Surveys (GSSs) through 2000.<sup>3</sup> Since then the GSSs of 2002-2008 yielded estimates of the proportion of American adults who prefer no religion of 12, 13, 15, and 16 percent. Thus, we observe change but less in this decade than in the 1990s. We consider three ideas that are consistent with these data. Americans may be moving away from religion more slowly than they were before, other events like the attacks on September 11, 2001 may have temporarily countered the demographic and political factors prompting change, or we may have overestimated how much change was going on in the late 1990s. Adjudicating these explanations is complicated by the intrinsic uncertainty of sample data. Each percentage is precise only to within a range of plus or minus a percentage point, and the observed changes are only one or two percentage points in each two year interval. We use both statistical models of the trend and a nonparametric regression to help us evaluate the three hypotheses.

Figure 1 shows the observed percentages and the corresponding confidence interval for each

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<sup>3</sup>Political views were not asked until 1974, so most of that original paper dealt with 1974-2000.

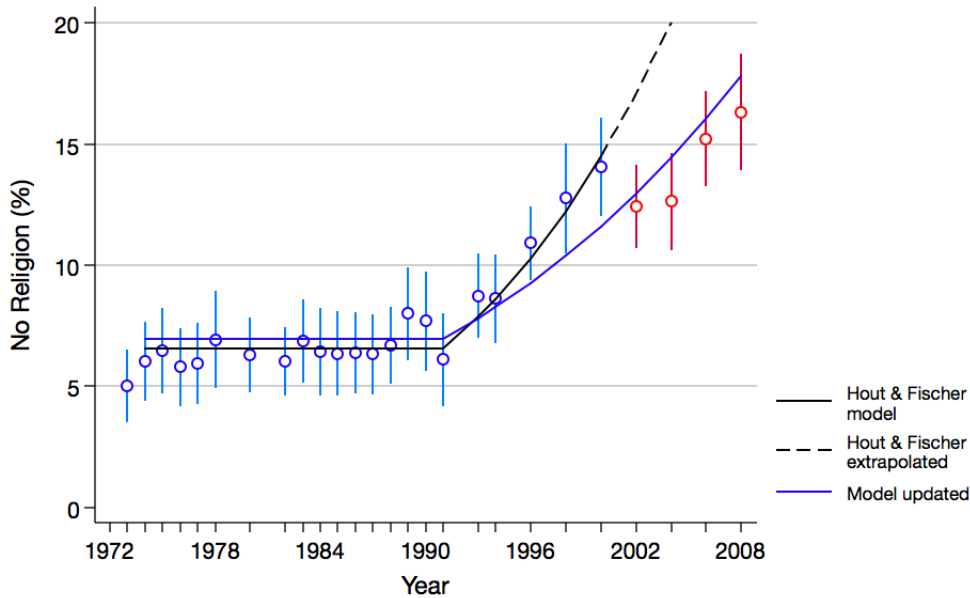


Note: Circles show observed data; vertical lines show 95% confidence intervals.  
 Source: General Social Surveys, 1973-2008 (weighted), persons 25-74 years old.

Figure 1. Percentage with No Religious Preference by Year

GSS since 1973. Our 2002 paper included a model that summarized the trend through 2000. It specified no change 1973-1991 and a constant increase in the log-odds of having no religion thereafter.<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 indicates that the prevalence of having no religion in the recent past is far below what that model implied it would be. Simply extrapolating our earlier results (solid black line) yields predicted percentages for 2002-2008 (dashed black line) that are, by 2008, almost twice as high as the observed percentage. We never intended the model for forecasting, and we noted in a footnote that the data were not consistent with an indefinite upward trend. So a downward revision of our estimate of the rate of change is less a surprise than an adjustment we anticipated having to make. Merely updating the model by getting the best fit for all years 1973-08 (blue line) lowers the estimated rate of change so much that the predicted percentages for 1996, 1998, and 2000 are all significantly *less* than their observed percentages. This result rules out the third hypothesis. We

<sup>4</sup>Our model is a special case of a general class of models – known in the technical literature as spline functions, a contraction of “spliced line” functions – that allow for the rate of change that prevails in one period of time to differ from the rate of change in another period. Here we specify a rate of change of zero initially and estimate the subsequent rate of change from the data.



Note: Circles show observed data; vertical lines show 95% confidence intervals.  
 Source: General Social Surveys, 1973-2008 (weighted), persons 25-74 years old.

Figure 2. Percentage Preferring No Religion by Year According Two Models Based on Hout & Fischer (2002)

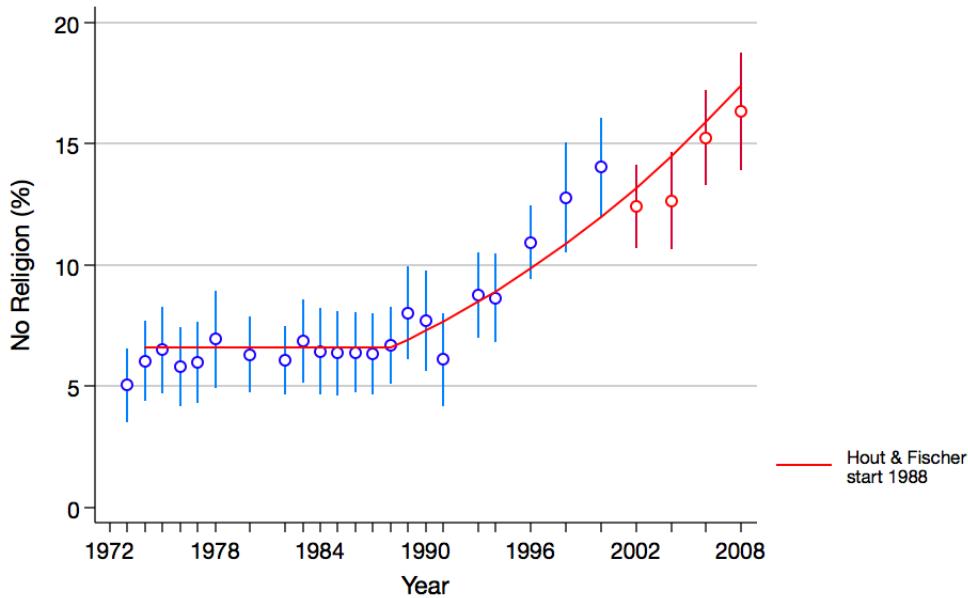
probably overestimated the rate of change in the 1990s but that is not the whole explanation for the new pattern.

Close examination of Figure 2 shows that more GSS respondents reported no religion in 1989 and 1990 than previously, hinting that change may already be underway. In 1991 the percentage with no religion dipped to one its lowest levels in the whole time series. We hinged our spline function in 1991 because increase was monotonic after 1991. Perhaps we allowed the 1991 data point too much leverage in the analysis. Maybe the trend was already underway and we overestimated the pace of change after 1991 by using a statistical model that denied change prior to 1991.

Figure 3 shows the results of a new spline model; this one stipulates that the increase in the percentage of adults with no religion actually began after 1988.<sup>5</sup> The revised model fits significantly better than the alternatives in Figure 2.<sup>6</sup> The predicted values for the revised model are all within the 95 percent confidence intervals for each year's point estimate. We test the hypothesis that the

<sup>5</sup>An alternative, nonparametric model (Cleveland, 1993) yields a very similar result. The nonparametric result is in appendix figure A1.

<sup>6</sup>The error sum of squares,  $\sum (y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2$ , for the revised model is less than half that for the updated model; .00159 compared with .00333, respectively.



Note: Circles show observed data; vertical lines show 95% confidence intervals.  
 Source: General Social Surveys, 1973-2008 (weighted), persons 25-74 years old.

Figure 3. Percentage Preferring No Religion by Year According New Spline Model

trend away from organized religion slowed in this decade with an alternative spline function that specifies one rate of change 1988-2000 and a different rate of change 2000-2008. This alternative model does not significantly improve fit.<sup>7</sup>

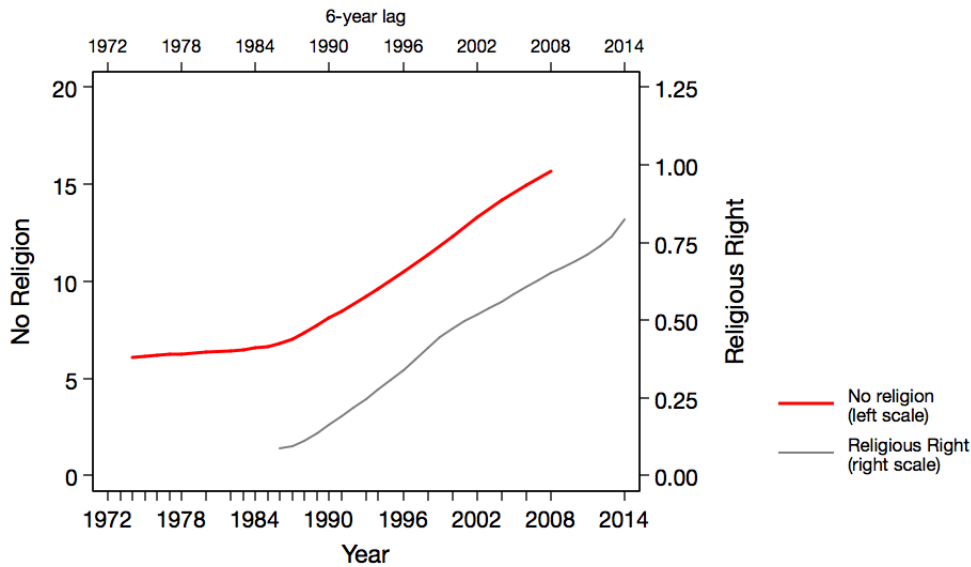
Evidence that change started earlier and proceeded at a slower pace is consistent with both the political and demographic mechanisms of change we proposed. In the next two sections we break down the trends by political views and year of birth to confirm that the details are consistent as well.

## Political Reaction

The rise of no religion coincides with the rise of the religious right. Figure 4 compares the trend in identifying with no religion with mentions of the religious right in popular media. To scale mentions of the religious right, we divide the number of times articles in newspapers and magazines refer to it by the number of times those publications mention “Republican Senator.” We allow a six-year lag between the public discussion time series and the religious identification time series in order to allow changes to have their hypothesized effects. The strong correspondence between

<sup>7</sup>The error sum of squares under the new model is .00151.

the two trends make clear the relevance of politics for the changes in religion we see in the GSS.



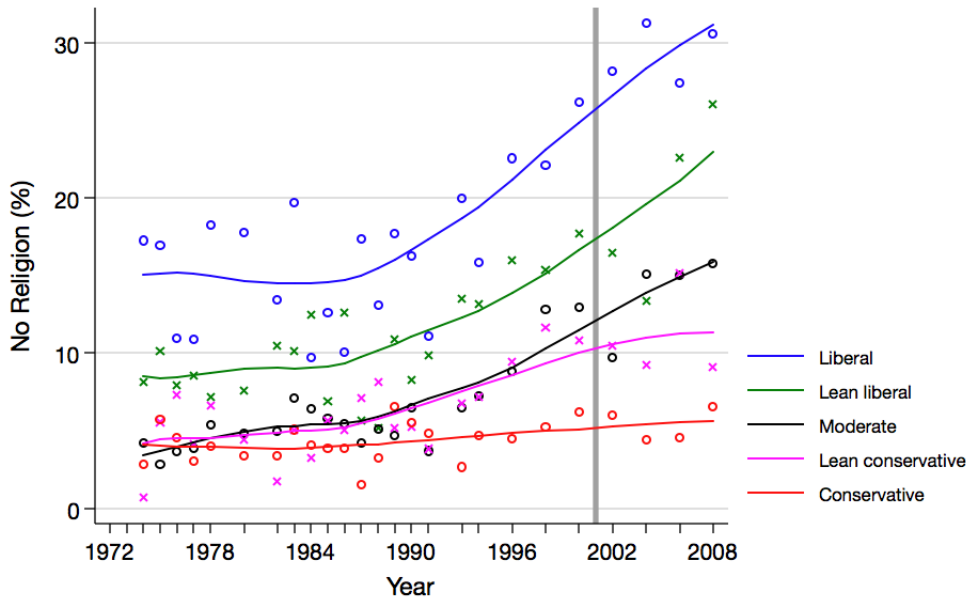
Note: Both series smoothed using locally estimated (loess) regression; mentions of the religious right compared to mentions of Republican senator.  
Sources: General Social Surveys, 1973-2008 (weighted), persons 25-74 years old; Lexis/Nexis search by authors.

Figure 4. Percentage Preferring No Religion by Year and References to “Religious Right” in Popular Media Six Years Earlier

Aggregate trends are less convincing than a direct link at the individual level. The evidence as of 2000 indicated that political liberals were most likely to have no religion, followed by people who leaned toward liberal views, political moderates, those who leaned toward conservative views, and conservatives. Liberals and moderates were substantially more likely to report no religion in 2000 than earlier but conservatives continued to identify with organized religion at the same rates as they had in the 1970s. Figure 4 updates the trends in religious affiliation by political views.<sup>8</sup> The data continue to support the political interpretation. The evidence of politically inflected change is even slightly clearer in that people who leaned conservative have now diverged from political moderates and assumed a position between moderates and conservatives. The correlation between political views and religious identification actually grew between 2000 and 2008. Since 2000, liberals, people who lean toward liberals, and moderates continued to move away from organized religion; the percentage of liberals and moderates with no religion in 2008 is five points higher

<sup>8</sup>The data points are shown with unconnected symbols. The lines show the results of a nonparametric fit to the data points for each political category.

than it had been in 2000. There has been no change in religious identification among conservatives and those who lean toward conservatives.



Note: Circles show observed percentages; vertical lines show 95% confidence intervals.  
 Source: General Social Surveys, 1973-2008 (weighted), persons 25-74 years old.

Figure 5. Percentage Preferring No Religion by Year and Political Views

## Generational Replacement

The so-called “greatest generation” — people born 1915-1924 — was possibly the most religious in American history (Fischer and Hout, 2006, pp. 197–200). Almost all professed a religion, most attended services as adults, and they express strong beliefs about God and most other matters of faith.<sup>9</sup> Our analysis in 2002 showed that the disappearance of this cohort contributed to the overall trend away from organized religion. They were being replaced by much less religious young people. The propensity to identify with a religion waned a little more for each cohort born from 1935 to 1950 and leveled off (Hout and Fischer, 2002).

Younger cohorts that have mostly entered adulthood since 1990 are substantially less religious than previous cohorts. Figure 6 shows that 16 and 18 percent of people born 1965-1974 have no

<sup>9</sup>Belief in life after death is an interesting exception (Greeley and Hout, 1999).

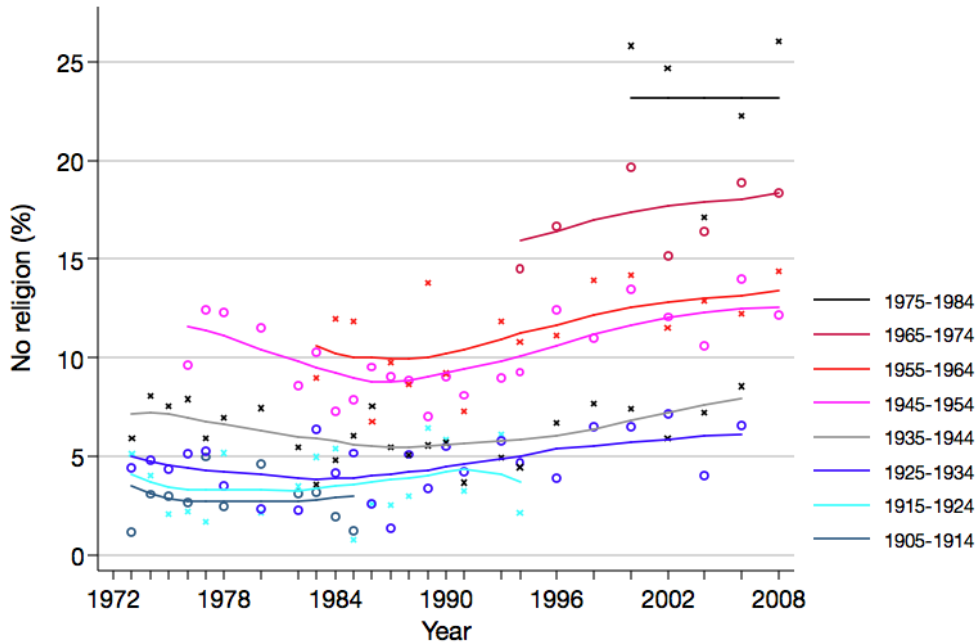


Figure 6. Percentage Preferring No Religion by Current Year and Year of Birth

religion and 23 percent of the cohort born 1975-1984 report no religion.<sup>10</sup> People born after 1975 were not old enough to be in our previous analysis and we had relatively few observations on people born 1965-1974, so this is important new evidence about cohort succession. Because they are relatively young and unmarried — two important lifecycle predictors of having a religion — some of the people less than 30 years old probably acquired a religion after the GSS interviewed them. But at the time they were observed, the cohorts entering adulthood were contributing substantially to the trend away from organized religion.<sup>11</sup>

For the older cohorts marriage and children brought people who were raised with a religion back to that religion (Greeley and Hout, 1988). Traces of that pattern are visible in the data on cohorts born between 1925 and 1964 in Figure 6. The percentage of those cohorts with no religion declined in the early years of the times series. As the politically driven disaffection with organized religion began to affect them, the percentage with no religion rose. But the initial impact of family

<sup>10</sup>This estimate is quite imprecise, as the wide range of black x marks in Figure 6 indicates.

<sup>11</sup>Further analysis that includes all respondents, regardless of age, accumulates more evidence on the youngest cohort and yields almost the same estimate — 24 percent — of the percentage with no religion. The pace of increase in having no religion due to cohort succession is not slowing and is probably increasing slightly.

events was to reduce the percentage with no religion. We do not see that initial decline for the cohorts born after 1965, either because family has lost its influence or because the political effect is so strong it is obscuring the family effect.

In the older cohorts, marriage and children also brought religion to those raised without religion. Most joined their spouse's religion; others found a religion they could share with their family. In younger cohorts, as their numbers grew, people who were raised without religion married a spouses with the same secular background, so that in more couples neither spouse had a religion for the other to conform to; the percentage of married persons raised without religion who had a spouse with no religion doubled from 16 to 32 percent from the early 1970s to the early 1990s (Hout and Fischer, 2002, p. 171). Finally, the pressure on people raised without religion to adopt their spouse's religion may have diminished; the proportion of married people raised without religion who preferred no religion at the time of interview rose from 26 percent in the 1970s to 47 percent in this decade. This is consistent with an increase in the proportion of couples in which the spouses have different religious affiliations of all kinds (Fischer and Hout, 2006).

Starting with the cohort born in 1930, people raised without religion have been less and less inclined to acquire a religion. Among people born 1900-1929 and raised without religion, only 27 percent had no religion as adults. From the cohort born in 1930 to the one born in 1983 (our most recent observation), the percentage with no religion in adulthood rose, more or less linearly, to 75 percent — 48 percentage points in 53 years or almost a percentage point per year.

Among people raised with a religion, the trends are much closer to the overall pattern — so close, in fact, that we leave the figure out of this report to save space. Ranking the religious groups from high to low, we find that people raised Jewish or mainline Protestant were most likely to have no religion as an adult, followed closely by Catholics. Conservative Protestants and Afro-American Protestants were less likely to leave religion. Differences among types of religious upbringing reflect demographic differences among the religions; net differences in the statistical model presented below are substantially smaller than the gross differences we observed.

## Unchurched Believers

Many people who discussed our original findings with us — more often journalists but sometimes academics — equated not having a religion with being an unbeliever. Yet many of the new unreligious have conventional beliefs about God, the afterlife, and similar elements of a religious worldview. The best time series on belief in God is not the simple, binary Gallup question “Do you believe in God or a higher power?” but the question with six alternatives that Charles Y. Glock developed in the 1960s (Glock and Stark, 1965). Table 1 shows the distribution of people with no religion across the six categories. They correspond to popular notions of atheism, agnosticism, a believe in a higher power, and three variants of believing in God (wavering, uncertain, and certain). We pool observations from adjacent years because the individual samples are quite small, especially in the early years.

Table 1  
Beliefs About God, by Year: Persons 25-74 Years Old  
with No Religious Preference

<i>Belief</i>	<i>Year</i>				Total
	1988-1991	1993-1994	2000-2000	2006-2008	
I don't believe in God.	10.6	15.1	15.8	11.0	12.6
I don't know whether there is a God, and I don't believe there is any way to find out.	24.9	15.8	15.8	19.4	18.7
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.	23.8	26.2	22.8	28.9	26.5
I find myself believing in God some of the time but not at others.	7.7	5.4	5.5	7.1	6.6
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.	15.4	14.0	17.5	11.1	13.4
I know God really exists, and I have no doubts about it.	18.3	23.4	22.8	22.4	22.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of cases	158	219	267	590	1,234

Test of null hypothesis of no change (d.f. = 14.21, 6,536.24):  $F = 1.23$ ,  $p = .25$ .

Belief is more common than atheism, even among people who have no religion. Between 11 and 16 percent of people gave the atheist response “I don't believe in God” in different surveys; 13 percent of people with no religion express no belief in God. Another 19 percent expressed

agnosticism. Combined atheists and agnostics were just one-third of the people with no religion. There is no evidence in these data that unbelief is increasing.

Unbelief is more common among people with no religion than among people with religion, of course. About one percent of people who reported a religious preference said they do not believe in God; two percent gave the agnostic response. Certain belief retained a constant 70 percent over the twenty years.

Those percentages were for people out of and inside organized religion. Over the twenty years, the shift away from religion, increased atheism in the adult population from 1 to 3 percent; agnosticism increased from 3 to 5 percent. Belief without doubt decreased from 64 to 62 percent.

In short, the dramatic change in religious composition was not accompanied by dramatic change in belief. There was a statistically significant change of two or three percentage points from belief to unbelief. But it is an error to read the decline in belonging as a decline in belief.

To better interpret these trends (and nontrends) we invented the term “unchurched believer” (Hout and Fischer, 2002). These are people who believe in God but do not have a religion. In 1988 unchurched believers were 4.5 percent of American adults; twenty years later they were 11 percent. In 1988 unchurched unbelievers — people who neither believe in God nor have a religion — were 2.5 percent of adults; twenty years later they were 5 percent. Figure 6 shows the trends. Unchurched believers are the category of people with no religion that is growing faster.

In our 2002 paper, we also considered prayer and church attendance among people with no religion. The patterns in the new data are no different so we do not go into detail here. Suffice to say that as the preference for having no religion has spread, the frequency of prayer and church attendance among people with a religion increased modestly as the weaker members left. Prayer and church attendance also increased slightly among people with no religion as the unchurched believers are more likely to pray and attend services than are unbelievers (also see Greeley and Hout (1999)).

Exploring these issues further, we found that fewer unbelievers profess a religion now than in the 1980s, prompting a decline in the prevalence of “churched unbelievers” from 4 to 2 percent of adults.

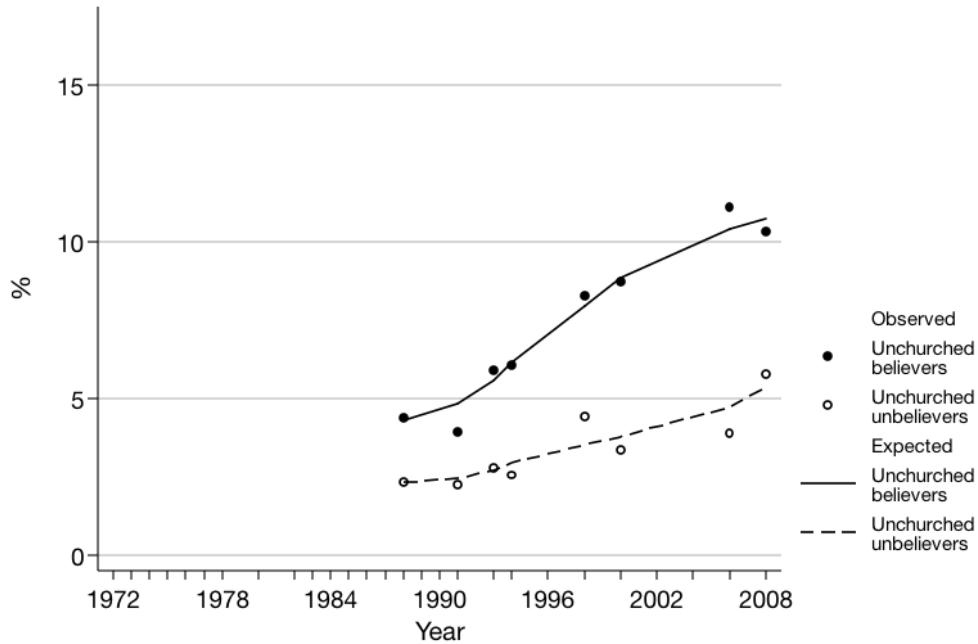


Figure 7. Decomposition of People with No Religion According to Belief in God

## A Sociodemographic Model

Knowing the religion a person was raised in and the year she was born is not sufficient to predict who will have no religion. Gender, racial ancestry, marital status, parenthood, education, and region of the country all influence who will and will not have a religion. Table 2 shows the results of three models. A gross model that includes only the spline function in Figure 2 (Model 0), a simple demographic model that adds dummy variables for cohorts, a dummy variable for being raised without religion, and an interaction between cohort and religious origins (Model 1), and the full socio-demographic model (Model 2).

Table 2. Coefficients from the Sociodemographic Model of No Religious Preference: Persons 25-74 Years Old, 1973-2008

<i>Independent variable</i>	Model		
	0	1	2
Period spline <sup>a</sup>	.054* (.003) <sup>b</sup>	.017* (.004)	.020* (.003)
<u>Year of Birth:</u>			
Before 1925		.000 —	.000 —
1925-1934		.143 (.107)	.101 (.108)
1935-1944		.498* (.094)	.398* (.098)
1945-1954		1.067* (.087)	.871* (.092)
1955-1964		1.033* (.090)	.781* (.097)
1965-1974		1.323* (.099)	1.027* (.106)
1975-1984		1.586* (.128)	1.168* (.142)
Raised without religion		2.202* (.076)	2.107* (.082)
<u>Interaction: Raised without religion since 1965</u>		.209 (.118)	.257* (.122)
Woman			-.613* (.040)
<u>Racial Ancestry:</u>			
African American			-.403* (.067)
Latino			-.379* (.082)
Chinese or Japanese			.547* (.166)
Other			.000 —
<u>Region of the Country:</u>			
Northeast			.000 —
Midwest			-.095 (.068)
South			-.383* (.066)
Mountain			.213* (.093)
Pacific			.498* (.070)

<i>Independent variable</i>	0	1	2
<u>Education: Number of credentials</u>			.033 (.023)
Advanced degree			.300* (.082)
<u>Marital Status</u>			
Married once			-.380* (.071)
Remarried			-.050 (.088)
Divorced			-.215* (.063)
Widowed			-.609* (.120)
Never married			.000 —
Parent <sup>c</sup>			-.527* (.069)
Constant	-2.659* (.033)	-3.445* (.079)	-2.438* (.103)

<sup>a</sup>A spline function equal to 0 prior to 1988 and  $t-1988$  thereafter.

<sup>b</sup>Standard errors adjusted for survey design (see text).

<sup>c</sup>The parenthood effect applies only to ever-married persons.

\* $p < .05$ .

If cohort differences and the increasing intergenerational persistence of being raised without religion suffice to account for the trend in the preference for no religion, then the coefficient for the period variable — a spline function hinged at 1988 — would be zero in Model 1. If racial, regional, educational, and regional patterns account for whatever residual is left over after adjusting for cohort and religious origins, then the period coefficient in Model 2 would be zero. The period coefficient in Model 0 is .054; the period coefficient in Model 2 is .020. Thus, social and demographic patterns account for 63 percent of the gross trend.<sup>12</sup> That is a larger fraction than we got using the data through 2000. The distinctly greater propensity to avoid religion among people who have come of age since the mid-1990s has tipped the balance from the political to the demographic explanation. We temper that last conclusion, however, knowing that the cohorts born 1965-1974 and later are distinctive, in part, because they came of age in the politicized environment that prompted members of older cohorts to change from a religious to a nonreligious identity.

<sup>12</sup> $100 \times (1 - .020 / .054) = 63$ .

The social differences in the propensity to have no religion are quite substantial. Men are 83 percent more likely to have no religion than women.<sup>13</sup> Americans with Chinese or Japanese origin are twice as likely to have no religion as African Americans; Pacific coast residents are twice as likely as Southerners to have no religion. Single people are less likely to have a religion than married people in general and far less likely than married parents.

These social correlates have been important for a long time, even when only 5, 6, or 7 percent of adults had no religion (Glenn, 1987). They contribute to variation in having or not having a religion at a given time. But they contribute relatively little to the trend we saw in Figure 1. In fact the lifecycle effects of marrying and having children work against the period effects that push people away from religion. Looking back to Figure 5, we see cohorts born 1935-1964 moving toward religion over time until the political period effect kicks in the mid-to-late-1980s. Thus the period effect is stronger than it appears in that figure because it is working against the opposite family lifecycle effects. This appears in Table 2 in the way the period coefficient in Model 2 is somewhat larger than the period coefficient in Model 1; controlling for the family lifecycle effects reveals a downward bias in the estimate that ignore them.

## **Religion and Society in Tension**

Classical treatments in the sociology of religion from Durkheim (1912/1995) to Merton (1957) stress how it binds people to society and one another. In the 1960s Glock and Stark (1965) questioned the integrative power of religion and raised the issue of religiously inspired conflict in *Religion and Society in Tension*. Our political hypothesis also brings the tensions to the forefront. We are arguing that when some religious leaders speak out for a more conservative social agenda that limits abortion, opposes gay rights, and features religious messages at public functions they mobilize the politically conservative members of their denomination but push away political moderates and liberals who have a weak attachment to the denomination. In bringing their religious commitments into the public sphere, these advocates politicize religion. Americans' answers to questions about tensions between religion and society from 1998 and 2008 show that religion is more controversial now than a decade ago.

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<sup>13</sup> $100\exp(.613) = 83$ .

Table 3  
Indicators of Religious Tensions by Year and Religious Preference:  
Persons 25-74 Years Old, United States, 1998 and 2008

<i>Question</i>	Answer pattern	Year	No religion %	Religion %
As far as people running religious organizations are concerned, would you say you have . . . hardly any confidence in them?	A	1998	50	15
		2008	58	20
		<i>p</i> ≤ .05	no	yes
Looking around the world, religions bring more conflict than peace	B	1998	62	30
		2008	78	60
		<i>p</i> ≤ .05	yes	yes
People with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others	B	1998	72	44
		2008	81	65
		<i>p</i> ≤ .05	no	yes
Religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections	B	1998	75	65
		2008	83	72
		<i>p</i> ≤ .05	no	yes

Answer patterns: A = “A great deal, only some, or hardly any” (percentage “hardly any” is shown); B = “Strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree” (percentage “strongly agree” plus “agree” is shown).

The data in Table 4 make two important points. People who prefer no religion harbor strong views about organized religion. The majority have hardly any confidence in the people running organized religion, and even stronger majorities agree that religions bring more conflict than peace, that religious leaders are too often intolerant of others, and that clergy should not try to influence how people vote in elections. In every case the percentage was higher in 2008 than in 1998, though only the question about conflict and peace increased significantly (by 16 percentage points).

People who have a religious preference have far more confidence in church leaders than people who prefer no religion do, but they share the other negative views. And all four indicators were significantly more negative in 2008 than in 1998.

In short, the majority of Americans, even those with a religious preference, now hold negative views of religion. Politicization is not the only source of these negative views. The second item invites people to look “around the world” so some answers probably reflect images of jihadists and suicide bombers and not the domestic social agenda. The third question has some of that flavor as well, especially as they appeared back-to-back in this order in the questionnaire. So we must

take care not to read the answers too parochially, the GSS having asked the respondents not to do that. That caution in mind, we cannot miss the fact that the institution of organized religion — worldwide and national — has a tarnished image.

There is some “wobble-room” in these data. Survey respondents display a kind of agreement bias; some people agree with contradictory statements. A question that parallels the second one but says “. . . religions bring more peace than conflict” would get more agreement than the disagreement to the present wording implies.

## **Personalized Religion**

Americans believe in God but suspect churches and people with strong religious views. How do we reconcile this world view? For most Americans religion is a private matter. The 2008 GSS included the item “I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services.” Twenty-four percent strongly agreed with that statement and another 42 percent agreed with it. People with no religion agreed more strongly: 31 percent strongly agreed and 31 percent just agreed compared to 23 strongly agree and 44 percent agree among people with a religion.

Other markers of personalized religion abound in the survey record. Given the choice between labeling themselves “spiritual” or “religious” Americans opt for spiritual. The GSS does not make them choose; it offers both choices. Twenty-seven percent were very spiritual in 2008. Only 18 percent were very religious, but half of the very spiritual were also very religious (only 2 percent were very spiritual and not at all religious). Another 28 percent said they were moderately spiritual and moderately religious. The responses by people who prefer no religion were far less symmetrical: 15 percent very spiritual but only 2 percent very religious; 6 percent moderately both.<sup>14</sup> Among the people with no religion 64 said they were not religious at all and 26 percent said they were neither spiritual nor religious. Among the three-fourths of the unchurched who are a bit of either, nearly all are a bit spiritual and very few are a bit religious.

Americans’ quarrel with organized religion is with the “organized” part, not with religion per se. Most Americans believe in God and a life after death. Most attend services some of the time, but a minority attends weekly. They prefer to think of themselves as spiritual and directly connected

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<sup>14</sup>For these calculations we combine people with no religion in the 2006 and 2008 GSSs in order to reduce the margin of sampling error for the percentages.

to God and stay away from the label “religious” for its stern connotations unless they can tack the modifier “moderately” on it. From elementary school they are exposed to images of religious intolerance whether it is the story of European monarchs expelling the religious dissenters who colonized North America or colonial Puritans burning witches; *The Scarlet Letter* used to be part of the American literary canon for secondary schools. As they recite a pledge of allegiance to “one nation under God” they learn, too, that zealotry is usually bad. We cannot link these broad patterns to the responses in the GSS. But a long tradition in the sociology of religion makes us suspect a connection.

## Conclusion

In 2002 we reported that the fraction of American adults with no religious preference doubled from 7 to 14 percent during the 1990s (Hout and Fischer, 2002). Here we presented data from this decade that show the trend away from organized religion continues, albeit at a slower pace. Our analysis of the entire time series led us to the conclusion that the trend probably started earlier than we thought – perhaps as early as 1985, no later than 1988 – and that our previous estimate of the rate of change was, consequently, too high. The change occurred; it started earlier and continues.

We identified political tension and generational succession as the main sources for the trend away from religious affiliation. In the most recent data, 28 percent of political liberals answered “no religion” when asked what their religion was, compared with 15 percent of political moderates, and 5 percent of religious conservatives — a gap of 23 percentage points from left to right on the political spectrum.<sup>15</sup> In 1976-1978, 14 percent of political liberals, 4 percent of political moderates, and 4 percent of political conservatives said “no religion” — a gap of 10 percentage points across the political spectrum. From these contrasts and other supporting tabulations we concluded that the growing identification between organized religion and a conservative social agenda was pushing political liberals and moderates with weak attachments away from organized religion.

Generational change has two parts. People who were raised without religion from the 1960s onward are less likely than previous generations to acquire a religion in adulthood. For example, the small group of people who were born in the 1930s and raised without religion mostly had a re-

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<sup>15</sup>We combine the 2006 and 2008 data here to reduce sampling error.

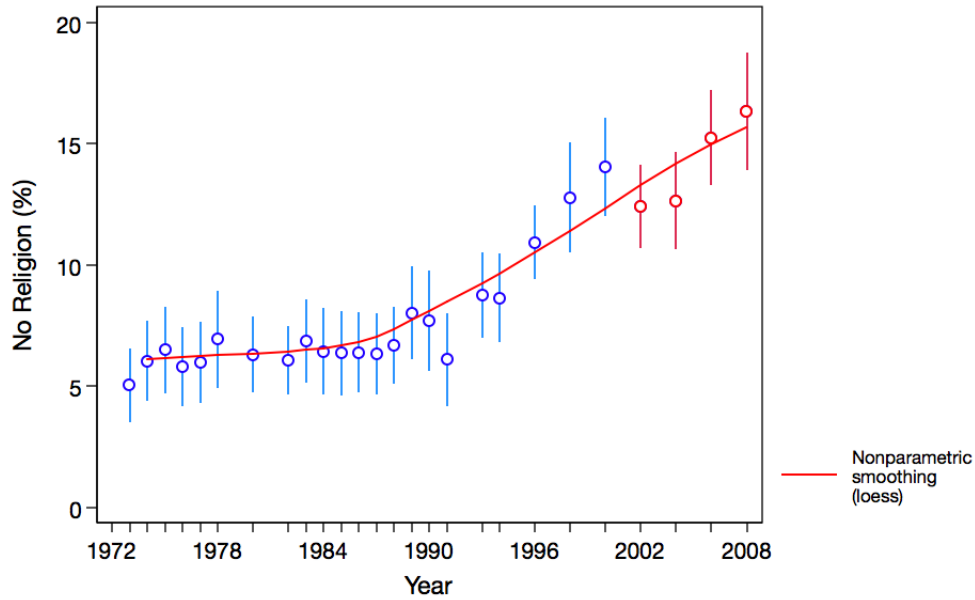
ligious preference when they were interviewed as adults — 24 percent had no religious preference. In contrast, among people born in the 1960s and raised without religion, 58 percent preferred no religion as adults; among people born in the 1980s and raised without religion, 79 percent prefer no religion now.

The other part of generational change is a trend away from organized religion among people raised with religion. People who were raised with religion from the 1960s onward are also less likely than previous generations to stay with religion in adulthood. Looking to the same cohorts as before, only 4 percent people born in the 1930s and raised with religion had no religious preference when they were interviewed as adults. In contrast, among people born in the 1960s and raised with religion, 11 percent preferred no religion as adults; among people born in the 1980s and raised with religion, 21 percent prefer no religion now.

These changes have more to do with organized religion in particular than with religion more generally. While affiliation with and identification with organized religion has waned, belief has not. American adults are as likely to believe in God and life after death now as they were twenty years ago. In 2008 62 percent of American adults believed God exists and had no doubts about that compared with 64 percent in 1988; 3 percent do not believe in God in any way compared with 2 percent in 1988. In both 1988 and 2008, 88 percent of Americans believed in life after death.

We call the people who believe in God or an afterlife but do not have a religion “unchurched believers.” In 2008 11 percent of American adults were unchurched believers compared to 4 percent twenty years earlier. There is a complementary category of “churched unbelievers” — people who state a religious preference but do not believe in God or life after death. Very few of these people prefer a religion do not believe in God; 3 or 4 percent in any year. Many of them used to prefer a religion but not believe in life after death. That combination of affiliation and unbelief used to be quite common but is far less so these days. In the early 1970s, 20 percent of American adults had a religious preference but did not believe in life after death; in 2006 and 2008 12 percent did.

Liberal and younger Americans distanced themselves from organized religion over the last twenty years without giving up their traditional beliefs in God, afterlife, and other spiritual matters.



Note: Circles show observed percentages; vertical lines show 95% confidence intervals.  
 Source: General Social Surveys, 1973-2008 (weighted), persons 25-74 years old.

Appendix Figure A. Percentage Preferring No Religion by Year: Observed Data and Expectations Based on Nonparametric Smoothing by Locally Estimated (loess) Regression

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