

Chapter 7

**How Americans Prayed: Religious Diversity and Change**

*Draft 5.0 – Fall, 2004 – for reviewers, May 2005*

*(apx. 8,200 words of text + apx. 3,600 words of notes)*

From the beginning of the nation, foreign observers noted how much more devout Americans were than the European peoples from which they initially sprang. That devotion increased over the nineteenth century as higher proportions of Americans became “churched.” A century ago, British ambassador to America Lord Bryce wrote that “Christianity influences conduct [in America] ... probably more than it does in any other modern country, and far more than it did in the so-called ages of faith.” Surveys in the latter part of the twentieth century repeatedly found that Americans were much likelier than other Western peoples to believe in God, practice religion, and consider religion important in their lives.<sup>1</sup> For skeptics on this point, George Bush’s 2004 re-election on the wings of church-based mobilization should have made them believers.

Diversity of faiths has also long characterized America. Immigrants brought with them faiths from around the world; and Americans launched many religious movements of their own which then spread elsewhere, including the Unitarians, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Christian Scientists. Even in the colonial era, this religious diversity attracted notice. The commingling of groups such as Quakers, Calvinists, Jews, Anglicans,

---

<sup>1</sup> Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*. Bryce, *The American Commonwealth, Vol. II*, p. 943. Surveys: see, e.g., Halman and Ruud de Moor, “Religion, Churches and Moral Values;” Greeley, “American Exceptionalism: The Religious Phenomenon;” and Caplow, “Contrasting Trends in European and American Religion.”

Catholics, Mennonites, and Presbyterians, as well as people of smaller sects, “Free Thinkers,” and the very many who were “unchurched,” seemed bizarre to visitors from an Old World, where, for the most part, every person in a region was a member of a single, state-supported church. Although established churches were part of colonial and early America, too (until 1833; notably Congregationalism in New England and the Church of England in the South), religious pluralism was a singular trait of the new nation and it only increased over the decades.<sup>2</sup>

Religious diversity has repeatedly and seriously divided the nation, most persistently Catholic immigrants’ efforts to resist “Protestantization” in matters from temperance to Bible reading in schools. Even at the end of the twentieth century, when about half of Americans who professed a religion saw themselves as “strong” adherents, Americans’ religious views shaped their stances on controversial matters like abortion and presidential candidates, and members’ enthusiastic commitments of energy, time and money were critical to their churches’ competition for adherents in the religious “marketplace” – all these fomented division. Yet, at the same time, religion served to unite the nation, particularly in times of trouble. Franklin Roosevelt led the nation in prayer during World War II, Lyndon Johnson asked for prayers following the assassination of President Kennedy, and Congressional leaders burst into a spontaneous singing of “God Bless America” following the attacks of September 11, 2001. At the end of the last century, great majorities of Americans felt that religion promoted a better society and better

---

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Butler, *Becoming American; Awash in a Sea of Faith*, and “Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600-1760;” also, Nobles, “Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 1750-1800.” For general histories of religion in America, see, e.g., Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*; Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*.

families; 7 of 10 wanted the influence of religion to grow. And yet, to the bafflement of any strict theologian, Americans were also tolerant of religious diversity, stipulating that it did not matter *which* religion gained influence.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, we describe American religious diversity, document its development, and weigh its implications. Religion in America grew even more diverse in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely because of demographic developments. A wave of immigration in the first quarter and another wave in the last quarter of the century brought and many millions of people from Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, and non-religious backgrounds and relatively few from Protestant countries . Together with differences in childbearing (mainline Protestants tended to have fewer children, Catholics to have more) meant that Protestants declined from almost 80 percent of the population in 1900 to about 60 percent in 2000. This dramatic shift led to some serious tension, fueling, for example, restrictions on immigration in the 1920s, but two factors seemed to mitigated the challenges of diversity. One was the increasing internal diversity within American Protestantism and the other was an increasing tolerance for – perhaps even preference for – religious variety. Over the century, Americans embraced a live and let live ethos, or perhaps a pray and let pray (or not) ethos. It was President Dwight Eisenhower who famously said, "America makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith--and I don't care what it is."

---

<sup>3</sup> In favor of more religion: Public Agenda, *For Goodness' Sake*. Seventy-six percent said that which religion did not matter. Jews, those with no religion, and journalists tended to dissent on the desire for more religion in public life.

## Religious Diversity in 2000

In the middle of the twentieth century, journalist Will Herberg's best-selling book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, captured the common notion that the United States was "Judeo-Christian" nation.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the century, Americans were acutely more aware that some people were outside that category: Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, members of new sects, and religious skeptics. To describe the religious status of Americans in 2000, we must consider two realms of religion. One is the organized infrastructure of denominations, churches, and codified theologies that make up public religion. People attend services and they pay dues or contribute as they participate in organized religion. The second realm is that of the private beliefs people hold and rituals they practice. These two realms overlap only partly: In the 1990s, for example, one-third of the Americans who answered "yes" when asked if they "had a religious preference" nevertheless said that they attended religious services only once a year or less. And at the same time, about half of the people who said they had *no* religious preference nevertheless said that they believed in God.<sup>5</sup>

*Identifying.* We begin with the first feature of religion, its organization, looking specifically at the variety of religious identities Americans have. Figure 1 shows the distribution of American adults among the major religious categories circa 2000, based on their answers to the question, "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other

---

<sup>4</sup> Herberg, *Protestant Catholic Jew*.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise stipulated, such survey data are from the General Social Survey.

religion, or no religion?” Different surveys of religious affiliation differ in some details, depending on technical issues like sampling and question wording, but the general picture shown in the figure is reliable.<sup>6</sup> About 55% of Americans identified themselves as Protestants – counting in the unhyphenated “Christians” as Protestant – and about one-fourth as Catholic. Jews, also part of the Western religious tradition, were but two percent. Other religious traditions – Eastern or Orthodox Christians, Muslim, Buddhist, other Eastern – claimed about one-half of one percent of Americans each.<sup>7</sup> Almost two percent of Americans provided other sorts of replies, including “interdenominational,” “pagan,” and traditional faiths associated with Native Americans. Fourteen percent of American adults answered “no religion.” We will look more closely at these Americans who claimed no religion later. We simply note here that only a minority of these Americans were explicitly atheistic or agnostic in their beliefs; what generally typified these people was a rejection of *organized* religion.

—Fig 1—

Protestants come in hundreds of specific denominations. Some are large and well-known, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Episcopal Church; others are collections of small denominations that have merged to form larger organizations like the Presbyterian Church

---

<sup>6</sup> These numbers combine data from the General Social Surveys of 1998 and 2000. We include only 25- to 74-year-olds, because the data exclude institutional populations, making the sample unrepresentative of younger and older cohorts.

<sup>7</sup> Although these small groups get considerable media attention and their numbers are growing, they remained small in 2000. Claims in particular about the size of the Islamic population after the events of September 11, 2001 were larger than suggested here (e.g., Niebuhr, “Studies Suggest Lower Count For Number of U.S. Muslims”). However, all of the scientifically reliable tabulations of Muslim adults put their share of the U.S. adult population at less than 1%. The average age of the American Muslim population is significantly younger than the average age of the American Jewish and Christian populations, so their share goes up when children are included in the count. Even after that adjustment, though, Muslims are at most 1% of the total population. See Smith, “Religious Diversity in America.”

(USA), the United Methodist Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Most are smaller or less centralized organizations of individual congregations. For example, the Christian Holiness Partnership (founded in 1867) was “officially made up of 21 different denominations, three interdenominational missionary agencies, 48 colleges and seminaries, six Holiness publishing houses, nearly 2,000 camp meetings, and hundreds of independent congregations and local churches that belong to denominations that are not officially identified as members.”<sup>8</sup> Figure 2 shows how Protestants distributed themselves across denominations and aggregations of specific denominations. We have grouped the Protestant denominations into four types based on how conservative their doctrines are: conservative, moderate, liberal, or not able to be categorized.<sup>9</sup> We do not imply that all persons in a denomination were similar in their personal beliefs; the categories are based on the doctrinal stances of the denominations, not individuals, and individuals often deviate considerably from their own denominations’ theologies.

— Fig 2 —

In 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention was the single largest specific denomination, with 17 percent of Protestant adults. Other, smaller conservative Baptist organizations combined to make the largest aggregation. Together, conservative Baptists accounted for one-third of all Protestants. Methodists of all types were next with about 14 percent of Protestant adults.

---

<sup>8</sup> Christian Holiness Partnership, [www.holiness.org/ourstory.htm](http://www.holiness.org/ourstory.htm) (Accessed 2002; defunct 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Smith, “Classifying Protestant Denominations.” 1990.

Lutherans were about 10 percent, but they split, with one-third of Lutherans in the conservative Missouri or Wisconsin synods while the rest (mostly in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) were doctrinal moderates. Some highly visible denominations had fewer adherents than less prominent ones. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) were just one percent of the GSS respondents;<sup>10</sup> the Jehovah's Witnesses were slightly bigger and the Christian Scientists slightly smaller. Meanwhile, adherents of the largely invisible Holiness and Pentecostal churches were three to four times more numerous as those in the Church of God in Christ and similar denominations. Finally, those branches of Protestantism that can trace themselves back to the Pilgrims and Puritans, so important in colonial times and in our national memory, made up but 2 percent of American adults in 2000. These groups had organized themselves into Reformed and Congregational Churches by the end of the eighteenth century and in 1957 joined to form the United Church of Christ. (In the chart, we also add to their number the Unitarians, who were originally an offshoot of the Congregationalists.) The shrinkage of these once dominant branches of Protestantism testifies to the dynamic changes in organized religion across American history.

*Participating.* The most common connection that Americans have to their churches, synagogues, and temples is through their membership in the organization and attendance at religious services. At the end of the twentieth century, about two-thirds of Americans claimed membership in a church or synagogue and about one-third of Americans claimed to attend religious services weekly or nearly weekly. Scholars argue about how accurate these reports of

---

<sup>10</sup> That fraction was higher in the GSS surveys of the 1980s when more primary sampling units were, by chance, in Utah.

attendance are. Most acknowledge that respondents tend to err in the direction of over-reporting attendance and also that people who are religiously active are more likely to answer surveys. The survey-based estimate of church attendance is probably 10 to 30 percent too high as a measure of a typical Sunday's congregations. If we take peoples' statements not so literally but as an indication of their relative attachment to organized religion, we can ask both how Americans compare to other people and how some Americans compare with others.

Americans report higher rates of attendance than do people in most other western nations.<sup>11</sup> Among Americans, there is notable variation by religion and by Protestant denomination in reported rates of near-weekly attendance. For example, in the late 1990s 60% of people belonging to small conservative congregations and groups reported near-weekly attendance, compared to about 42% of those in the Southern Baptist Convention, about one-third of Episcopalians and Catholics, and 16% of Jews.<sup>12</sup>

*Believing.* Membership and attendance numbers describe Americans' connections to organized religion in 2000. What about Americans' private beliefs and practices? Surveys generally find that upwards of about 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God.<sup>13</sup> In the GSS, 86 percent of Americans said that they believed in God and another eight percent in a

---

<sup>11</sup> Greeley, *Religion in Europe*, Transaction Press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Membership is from Gallup, "Gallup Poll Topics A-Z: Religion," [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com) (Accessed 25 April, 2000). The attendance figures are from the GSS, 1998-2000. On the controversy about attendance, some scholars maintain that there is no bias and one study of an Ohio country suggested that these estimates are double the true rates. See Hadaway et al., "What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance," and the follow-up symposium on church attendance in the February, 1998 issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

<sup>13</sup> So, for example, a 2004 Gallup Poll reported that 90% of Americans said they believed in God ([www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com), 18 May). Bishop, "Americans' Belief in God," is a skeptic on this point.

“universal spirit or higher power,” while only five percent disbelieved both. Answers to other questions reveal that huge majorities of Americans endorsed specific religious stances: 54% described themselves as religious and another 30% as “spiritual;” 79% agreed that “there will be a day when God judges whether you go to heaven or hell;” 61% said that religion was “very important” in their lives; and 46% labeled themselves as “born again” or “evangelical.” About 90% of Americans said that they prayed; 3 of 4 said that they prayed every day; and nearly all who prayed thought that their prayers were heard.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, given such intense religious feelings, it is noteworthy that, nevertheless, 75% of Americans said “yes” when they were asked, “Do you think there is any religion other than your own that offers a true path to God?,” and over 80% of those said such paths were equally good as their own. Similarly, three-fourths of Americans said that many religions – not just their own – “can lead to eternal life.” This Eisenhowerian ecumenism was an important feature of Americans’ religious thinking in 2000; most balanced their deep faith with a commitment to free choice and openness to other paths.<sup>15</sup>

### **Religious Diversity Increases in the Twentieth Century**

To understand how Americans reached this level of faith and diversity over the course of

---

<sup>14</sup> The Gallup Poll frequently asks questions about religion and report similar results. For example, circa 2000, 83% of Americans said they believed in heaven, 71% in hell, 79% in angels, and 68% in the devil (Winseman, “Eternal Destinations”).

<sup>15</sup> On praying: Gallup, “As Nation Observes National Day of Prayer.” Other items are from The Gallup Poll, “Gallup Poll Topics A-Z: Religion;” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr991224.asp>. On eternal life: Pew Research Center, “Americans Struggle with Religion’s Role,” p. 54. On thinking about religious diversity, see, e.g., Smith, “The Myth of Culture Wars.”

the twentieth century, we draw mostly on two sorts of survey data. One set tabulates the religious affiliations and convictions of representative samples of American adults, as reported to survey researchers from about 1950 through 2000. Before about 1950, the data are sparse and sometimes suspect. The second set includes the answers that respondents to the General Social Surveys of 1972 through 2000 gave when asked about the religion in their childhoods. This allows us to extend our view back to about 1900, the adolescent years of the oldest respondents. The retrospective technique has the side benefit of removing differences by age, since it gives us a religious picture of youths in each decade of the century. The drawback of retrospection is that, to some extent, people do misremember their youths. The direction of this bias, it is reasonable to suspect, is to inflate the religiosity of childhood.

*Identification.* We tell the story in three parts. First, we distinguish Americans who affiliated with the dominant, Western Judeo-Christian faiths from those who identified with other traditions and from those who profess no religious affiliation. We look closely at who claims “no religion.” Second, we examine trends in the division among Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. Third, we look within the largest and most diverse group, the Protestants. Figure 3A summarizes the results of Gallup Polls, Roper surveys, and the General Social Survey from 1947 through 2000 (the early ones are exclusively Gallup) to questions asking respondents for their religious affiliations. In Figure 3B, we use GSS respondents’ answers to the question, “In what religion were you raised?,” to describe the religious distribution of American teenagers from about 1904

through 1995.<sup>16</sup> Both figures tell the same story: Americans were almost all Protestants, Catholics, or Jews into the 1960s. In 1966, *Time* magazine’s cover story, “Is God Dead?,” sparked national discussions about faith and, indeed, around 1970, the total hegemony of mainline Western faiths started to weaken, dropping under 95% in 1972. Increasing proportions of Americans began reporting “other” religions<sup>17</sup> or no religion.<sup>18</sup> (Because we have “smoothed” the lines, the figures underestimate the suddenness of the increase in “no religion” responses in the 1990s.)<sup>19</sup> In any case, religious diversity across the global boundaries of religion increased in the last third of the century.

---

<sup>16</sup> The Gallup data were downloaded from their web site ([www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com)). We calibrated the percentages to exclude missing data. Only after 1992 were Orthodox and Mormons distinguished from “others,” so they are pooled here with Others. Where Gallup reported multiple polls in one year, we averaged them to create a single estimate. The Roper data were collected and standardized by our Berkeley colleague Henry Brady (with the assistance of Laurel Elms) and made available to us through the facilities of the UC Berkeley Survey Research Center. The GSS makes distinctions among “others” only after 1996, so they remain pooled here. In Figure 3A, we use a 4<sup>th</sup>-order smoother to summarize the distribution of points.

In Figure 3B, we calculated the percentages for each specific birth cohort and added 16 years, and then used a seven-year moving average to smooth the results. To be sure we are looking at American youngsters, we examined only respondents who reported that they were living in the United States when aged 16. Using reported childhood religion to measure past religious diversity presents a few technical problems, but can still give us a general overview. Since some religious groups have high birth rates, they will have more representatives alive at the end of the century to report on their religions at age 16. This will give an impression that there were more, say, Catholic families, earlier in the century than was really the case. Similarly, to the extent that some religious groups have shorter life expectancies, they will be under-represented for earlier years in the century. Nevertheless, these biases are not likely to affect the general conclusions we draw from the data.

<sup>17</sup> “Others,” sociologists have found, include respondents who do not choose the mainstream labels but are, in fact, Christians of some sort. See Sherkat, “Dynamics and Composition of ‘Other’ Religions in the GSS.” In 1998 and 2000, the GSS more carefully coded “others” and found that about half labeled themselves Christian Orthodox, “Christian,” or “inter-denominational.” Only 15% of “Others” (less than one percent of all respondents) claimed an eastern religion and only about 10% claimed Islam (about one-half of one percent of all respondents).

<sup>18</sup> One complication in the trends concerns the proportion of Americans who claimed no religion in the last decade of the century. The Gallup Poll reported a decline from 11% in 1991 to 6% in 2000, while the GSS reported an increase from 7% to 14%. We are inclined to trust the latter estimate more because the GSS response rate is substantially higher and because other sources, such as the American National Election Study and Pew Surveys also estimated that between 12 and 14 percent of adults claimed no religion in 2000.

<sup>19</sup> See Hout and Fischer, “Explaining the Rise of Americans with No Religious Preference.”

– Fig 3A, B --

In understanding the increase in “nones,” it would be a mistake to equate claiming no religion preference with having a secular world view because American adults who reported being raised with no religion (Figure 3B) or currently having no religion (Figure 3A) were largely distinguishable, not by their beliefs or lack thereof, but by their rejection of organized religion.<sup>20</sup> Most held a conventional cluster of religious beliefs. For example, about one-fifth of those, across all the years of the GSS, who reported no religious preference also said that they had no doubts that God existed; another roughly one-fifth said that they believed in God although they occasionally had doubts; and another one-fourth said that they believed in a “higher power.” In 1998, almost 60 percent of “nones” said that they believed “that God watches over me” and nearly 40 percent reported praying at least weekly. What stood out about these respondents was their aversion to religious services and their disdain for organized religion. The rejection of formal religion, much more than loss of faith, also explains (along with demographic changes such as delayed marriage) most of the 1990s upswing in the proportion claiming no religion. An additional factor contributed to that development: The increasing identification of churches with conservative politics led political moderates and liberals who were already weakly committed to religion to make the political statement of rejecting a religious identification. (In other words, if being religious seems to mean being right-wing, then they spurned the religious identity.) Whether this politicization will grow into the anti-clericalism familiar to Europeans remains to be seen.

---

<sup>20</sup> This discussion draws on Hout and Fischer, “Explaining the Rise in Americans with No Religious Preference.”

The recent increases in the proportion of American adults professing no religion, together with the slight increase in people holding to religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, has weakened the monopoly of Western faith traditions in America. Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism claimed over 95% of Americans from about 1900 to about 1968, but about 83% of them in 2000. Culturally, the diversification may be less than these numbers suggest. Researchers have noted, for example, that non-Western immigrants at the end of the century adapted their religious practices and even theologies toward mainstream American ones, just as Catholics and Jews had assimilated elements of Protestantism a century earlier ( a point we return to near the end of this chapter) .<sup>21</sup>

*Protestant, Catholic, and Jew.* We turn next to the changes in religious affiliation among western religions. Figures 4A and 4B are drawn from the same data as before but focus in on the three major religious groups. There are a few minor discrepancies between the two, as one might expect given that Figure 4A describes the affiliations of adults and Figure 4B that of youth. (So, for example, Jews were about 3 percent of adults but only about 1 percent of teens in 2000.) Nonetheless, the overall stories are parallel.<sup>22</sup> Protestants made up a sharply declining percentage of the western religion category and Catholics a sharply increasing proportion. Immigration and differences in birth rates help explain this weakening of the Protestant majority. American adults who immigrated from elsewhere early in the century were about equally as likely to be Catholic

---

<sup>21</sup> Yang and Ebaugh, “Transformations in New Immigrant Religions”; Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*.

<sup>22</sup> The data-points in Figure 4A here are, again, from pooled Gallup, Roper, and GSS polls. However, the Roper polls were distinctive in showing a sharper increase in Catholics from the mid-1970s to 1992 (the last date for which religion was available in the Roper series).

as to be Protestants, but among those who immigrated near the end of the century, the Catholic-reared outnumbered the Protestant-reared by better than five to one.<sup>23</sup> Immigration increasingly contributed Catholics (as well as “others,” as we saw earlier) to America’s religious diversity. Figure 4B, the religious affiliations of *native* youth from 1904 on, shows a dramatic shift in proportions, from almost 80:20 Protestant-Catholic for those who were teens around 1910 to about 60:40 Protestant-Catholic for those who were teens in the 1990s. (The adult lines in Figure 4A show a weaker trend toward Catholicism than do the youth figures in Figure 4B because a growing proportion of Catholics converted to Protestantism in the later years of the century – largely in reaction to the Church’s rejection of divorce.<sup>24</sup>) By any measure, the numerical dominance of Protestants had declined by the end of the century. Combining the data of Figures 3 and 4, the proportion of all native-born Americans who professed Protestantism dropped from nearly 80 percent in the 1900s to 50 percent in the 1990s – a tremendous diversification of American religion.<sup>25</sup>

– Fig 4A, B –

---

<sup>23</sup> These estimates are based on the GSS data concerning the religion in which respondents were raised. Among those raised abroad in one of the western faiths, about 45% of those who were 16 in the 1920s had been raised Catholic, but about 80% of those who reached 16 in the 1980s were raised Catholic.

<sup>24</sup> Rates of conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism among the very earliest-born GSS respondents were about 10 to 15 percent. But only about 7% of the cohort that turned 16 around 1920 converted. That figure climbed steadily upwards into the 15-17% range for cohorts that turned 16 around 1970. (These figures include only respondents who had been 16 in the United States and had reached age 30 at the time of the interview. Rates of conversion were lower for the most recently born, but they had not yet been “exposed” long to “opportunities” for conversion.) On the other hand, rates of Protestant-to-Catholic conversion (for the same sorts of people) fluctuated little and never exceeded 5%. In sum, the increasing losses of many Catholic-reared adults to Protestantism accounts for the difference in the youth and adult trend lines show in Figures 6 and 5 respectively. For more, see Hout, “Angry and Alienated.”

<sup>25</sup> See also Smith and Kim, “The Vanishing Protestant Majority.”

*The Restructuring of American Protestantism.* The “mainline” denominations that once made up two-thirds of American Protestants declined in size – most relatively but some absolutely, too. Figure 5 displays the retrospective, youth data from the GSS. The mainline Protestant denominations – Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Lutherans – claimed smaller shares of American youth, while Baptists and “others” increased their shares.<sup>26</sup> While American Protestants generally shifted toward the more conservative churches, they also became more organizationally diverse, with, for example, schisms producing more denominations within the larger categories (e.g., more variants of Lutheranism).<sup>27</sup> Also, the growing “other” group was composed of dozens of small denominations and sects.

– Fig. 5 –

Demographic changes are largely responsible for the conservative drift among Protestants, just as they are for declining proportion of Protestants in the general population. The shift from a 60:40 split in favor of mainline denominations to a 40:60 split was mostly due to the conservatives’ higher fertility and earlier childbearing. A detailed analysis shows that 70 percent of the growth of the conservative denominations was thanks to their advantage in producing children; the remainder – and more of the later change – stemmed from a decline in an earlier pattern, that a proportion of people raised in a conservative home joined a mainline denomination

---

<sup>26</sup> “Others” includes members of many small, often fundamentalist or evangelical, denominations and of independent churches and Protestants with no particular denominational attachment.

<sup>27</sup> Sutton and Chaves. “Explaining Schism in American Protestant Denominations, 1890-1990,” figure 1.

in adulthood. By the end of the century, they more often stayed put.<sup>28</sup>

There is also some evidence that individual churches within Protestant denominations became more doctrinally diverse. For example, both conservative and mainline denominations alike debated issues regarding the ordination of women and the acceptance of gays.<sup>29</sup> Mark Chaves's detailed analyses of the women's ordination issues are exemplary on this point. He shows how disputes resolved at the denominational level persist at the local level because, even though a denomination may take a decision to allow a practice, traditions of local autonomy give rise to disagreements within congregations about whether or not to take an action. In the end, this local adaptation to a national (or international) decision leads to differentiation below the denominational level.

*Religious Persistence and Switching.* Underneath the organizational recombinations from religious mergers and schisms, and in addition to the consequences of immigration and differential birth rates, religious change is produced by individuals' personal decisions to continue in or to leave the faith in which they were raised. In 2000, almost 75 percent of adults identified with the religion of their youth.<sup>30</sup> Many Americans “shop around” for a church<sup>31</sup> – half

---

<sup>28</sup> Hout, et al., “The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change.” Many authors, for example, James D. Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, and *The Culture Wars*, and Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, attribute the growth of conservative Protestant denominations and sects to conversions of mainline Protestants to conservative ones. That kind of conversion did not change significantly over the 75 years of available data, and thus could play *no* role in the changing distribution of American Protestants.

<sup>29</sup> On gays, see, e.g., Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics*.

<sup>30</sup> This calculation excludes the 4 percent of adults who were raised with no religion.

<sup>31</sup> Religious scholars have lately come to refer to a “religious marketplace,” for example, Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*; Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*.

of people raised Protestant and 30 percent of people raised Catholic or Jewish – but few “buy” the new brand. Indeed, a follow-up question indicated that most shopping occurs in connection with a move from one city or town to another.

Figure 6 shows the percentage of adults whose religions at the time they were interviewed were the same as the ones they said they were raised in, arranged by the years of their birth. The figure permits us to see historical change in switching religions. The top row shows that Protestants’ tendency to prefer the denominations of their youth differs by the type of denomination. People raised in conservative denominations were less likely than other Protestants to change; overall 77 percent stayed in the same tradition. Those raised in moderate or liberal denominations were likelier to go elsewhere, averaging 68 and 63 percent “stayers” respectively. None of the three Protestant groups show any trend toward more or less denominational persistence over the century. The second row of Figure 6 shows the religious stability of people raised Catholic, Jewish, or with no religion. Catholics born in the first decade of the 20th century were the most stable – over 90 percent of them persisted as Catholics – but that rate dropped substantially to merely 72 percent for cohorts born since 1960. (The small number of Jews in each cohort makes the apparent decline in their persistence since the 1960s uncertain.) Finally, early in the century, people raised without religion were very likely to acquire a religious preference in adulthood (typically, upon marriage). That changed after World War II, and in the later years people who were raised without a religion were as likely to stay in their “tradition” as were those raised in a religion.

Most people who switch move to a similar denomination.<sup>32</sup> Two-thirds of people who switched out of the Protestant denomination of their youth chose another Protestant destination, a tenth became Catholic, and a fifth said they had no religious preference. Among switchers out of Catholicism, about half became Protestant and a bit more than one-third claimed no religious preference. One-third of switchers out of Judaism became Christians and the other two-thirds adopted no religious preference. Of those people who were raised with no religion but took up religion as adults, 75 percent became Protestant, 14 percent became Catholic, and 3 percent became Jewish. Overall, religious switching since 19xx increased religious diversity as it helped swell the numbers with “no religion.”

Yet, the great majority of Americans stayed with the religion and denomination of their youth. Religious diversity increased largely as Catholic and Jewish immigrants brought their faiths with them from abroad in the early part of the twentieth century, as new immigrants brought additional faiths with them since the 1970s, and as being of “no religion” became a stable part of the religious marketplace. Individual change or conversion was a minor contributor.

### **American Attitudes Toward Religious Diversity**

Americans in the latter part of the century encountered increasing religious diversity, including greater numbers of fellow Americans who were outside the Judeo-Christian tradition or who stood apart from organized religion altogether. Americans have been historically noted as relatively accepting – relative to the Old World – of religious differences and seemed to become

---

<sup>32</sup> Sherkkat, “Religious Switching.”

more so over the twentieth century. In the 1920s, sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd studied Muncie, Indiana – which they labeled “Middletown” – as an archetypal American town. In the 1970s, other sociologists returned to Middletown to assess changes there. Much had changed of course, but one dramatic change was a massive decline in the proportion of Middletown youth who agreed that “Christianity is the one true religion and everyone should be converted to it.”<sup>33</sup> Another indicator of emerging tolerance is a question that the Gallup organization has asked over the years, “If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be [fill in], would you vote for that person?” where the filled-in label would be a Jew, Catholic, atheist, woman, or black. As we saw in Chapter X, acceptance of Jewish or Catholic presidential candidates increased from about fifty percent to almost all Americans between 1937 and 2000. And by 2000, about half of Americans said they were also willing to vote for an atheist, up substantially from decades earlier.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, telling an interviewer that one would vote for a Jew, Catholic, or atheist is different than actually doing so, but nonetheless, the change in the climate of opinion is impressive. The 1928, 1960, and 1976 presidential races can be thought of as practical tests of the avowed religious tolerance of Americans. The Democrats nominated Catholic candidates for president in 1928, Al Smith, and in 1960, John F. Kennedy; and in 1976 they nominated a born-again Christian, Jimmy Carter. Smith lost but Kennedy and Carter won, as did avowed “born-again” George W. Bush, Republican, in 2000. In none of these elections could the candidates have

---

<sup>33</sup> Caplow, et al., *All Faithful People*, Ch. 4; Caplow and Bahr, “Half a Century of Change in Adolescent Attitudes.” In 1924, 91% of high school students agreed; in 1977, 41% did.

<sup>34</sup> Voting data are from from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr990329.asp> (acc. 8-04-00).

won without support of the majorities outside their religious affiliations. Of course people weigh many issues when making their choice for president, but public discussions leading up to each of these elections indicate that religion was on peoples' minds. Scholars have investigated each of these elections, especially the 1960 and 1976 ones.<sup>35</sup> Surveys of American voters in 1960 indicate that many took Kennedy's religion into account when they voted. However, Catholics were more likely than Protestants or Jews to say they considered Kennedy's religion when deciding how to cast their vote, and they saw his Catholic religion as a reason to vote for him. Very few Protestants said that they voted for Nixon instead just because Kennedy was Catholic. Most tellingly, the general pattern of religious voting returned to its 1950s pattern when Johnson beat Goldwater in 1964. Similarly in 1976, the attraction of a co-religionist got Baptists who might have otherwise backed Ford to vote for Jimmy Carter in 1976; as in 1960 there is no evidence that others were dissuaded from voting Democratic by the candidate's religion.

Outside the presidential arena, there is ample evidence that Catholics and Jews can win important offices. Most big cities have had Catholic and Jewish mayors – even though few cities have Catholic majorities and no big cities have a Jewish majority. Several states have had Catholic and Jewish governors, and no state has a Catholic or Jewish majority. Although there is less research on mayoral and gubernatorial elections than on presidential elections, what there is indicates that attraction to co-religionists as symbolic standard bearers was important for Catholic and Jewish voters, but that there is little evidence of explicit anti-Jewish or anti-

---

<sup>35</sup> Our discussion draws from Manza and Brooks, *Social Cleavages and Political Change*, Ch. 4.

Catholic voting prior to the 1880s.<sup>36</sup> The nativist reactions of the nineteenth century were expressly opposed to the emerging political clout of Catholics and Jews.<sup>37</sup>

Americans' religious tolerance also extended to the a-religious or irreligious. In the last half of the century, a few polls asked respondents whether someone could be a Christian without attending church; 70 percent or more said yes.<sup>38</sup> Broader evidence: Since 1950s, surveys have asked people whether "somebody who is against all churches and religion" should be banned from making speeches "in your community" or "allowed to teach in a college or university." The percentage of American adults who favored banning the speech of skeptics fell from 35 percent in the early 1970s to 25 percent in 1996-2000; the percentage who think skeptics should not be allowed to teach fell from 58 to 41 percent; and the percentage who would remove a skeptical book from the library fell from 38 to 29 percent.<sup>39</sup>

Americans also became more tolerant of intimate relations across religious lines. Polls have occasionally asked whether respondents approve or disapprove of religious intermarriage. A generational difference that opens up in the 1960s, with more recently-born Americans being

---

<sup>36</sup> Erie, *Rainbow's End*; Lieberman, *A Piece of the Pie*.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel P. Hays, 1964. *Response to Industrialism*. U Chicago Press.

<sup>38</sup> On church attendance: In 1957 Gallup asked respondents, "Do you think a person can be a Christian if he doesn't go to church?" In 1996, Queens' University (Canada) researchers asked an American sample whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "I don't think you need to go to church in order to be a good Christian."

<sup>39</sup> Data from the GSS.

more tolerant of religious intermarriage than earlier birth cohorts.<sup>40</sup> This is backed up by behavior, as actual intermarriage increased, between Jews and Gentiles, between Catholics and Protestants, and among Protestant denominations – with the possible exception of the most conservative denominations.<sup>41</sup> The next figure shows the trend, by birth cohort, for the percentage of GSS respondents who said they were Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, and that their spouses currently espoused a different religion (solid line). It also shows the rates of intermarriage by Protestants across major denominations (dashed line).<sup>42</sup> Note, also, that the largest change occurred between the 1920-39 and 1940-59 cohorts, cohorts divided by whether they matured before or after the 1960s. Over the twentieth century, then, and especially during

---

<sup>40</sup> In 1959, Gallup asked Protestants and Catholics, “Would you have a serious objection to a daughter or son of yours marrying a [Catholic / Protestant]?” and asked Christians and Jews the same question about a Jewish-Gentile marriage. In 1968, Gallup asked, “Do you approve or disapprove of marriage between -- (a) Catholics and Protestants; (b) Jews and non-Jews?” The questions cannot be directly compared, but we can examine generational differences. In 1959, there were essentially no generational differences. In 1968, we see a notable difference between the pre-1920 and the 1920-1939 cohort, a change that continues into the following cohort. The gaps emerge only in the 1960s.

Percent who would not object (1959)/ would approve (1968)		<u>Born before 1900</u>	<u>1900-1919</u>	<u>1920-1939</u>	<u>Born after 1939</u>
Protestant-Catholic Marriage	1959	61% (n = 324)	62% (552)	63% (602)	—
	1968	—	58%* (649)	66% (632)	72% (235)
Jewish-Gentile Marriage	1959	49% (324)	53% (577)	53% (625)	—
	1968	—	52%* (649)	63% (632)	68% (235)

\* Cell includes respondents born before 1900.

<sup>41</sup> Kalmijn, “Intermarriage and Homogamy,” esp. pp. 410-11. Lehrer’s study, “Religious Intermarriage in the United States,” also suggests that the increase may not apply to fundamental denominations. Waite and Sheps, “The Impact of Religious Upbringing and Marriage Markets on Jewish Intermarriage,” is one of several papers documenting increasing rates of Jewish intermarriage from other data sets.

<sup>42</sup> The major families of denominations used here were Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian. Note that a chart using the religions that respondents and their spouses were *raised* in shows a similar trend line elevated about ten percentage points.

the “long 1960s,” Americans became much more accepting of religious diversity, even within their own marriages. A dramatic illustration of this widening acceptance is that in 2000 half of American Jews, who have historically and severely shunned intermarriage, agreed that “it is racist to oppose Jewish-gentile marriages.”<sup>43</sup>

— Fig 7 —

### Personal Practice and Belief

The institutional diversity of American religion grew in the twentieth century, as did tolerance of that diversity. But what happened to personal piety – belief and practice? The conventional wisdom is that modern Americans were, setting aside a handful of fundamentalists, less religious than their ancestors. But this is not what historians of religion have concluded. While belief and practice are difficult to measure for people long ago, the best assessment is that during the nineteenth century, Americans became *more* religious, not less. Adults were more likely to join churches, to understand Christian theology, and to systematically practice their faiths in 1876 than in 1776. This trend of *increasing* religiosity continued through at least most of the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> Here, we focus mainly on the latter part of the twentieth century and explore two general questions: One, in the midst of increasing diversity, how did average Americans’ religiosity change? Two, did Americans become more or become less divided in religious practice and belief?

---

<sup>43</sup> Poll cited by Musleah, “Jewish Jeopardy.”

<sup>44</sup> For overviews, see, e.g. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*; Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* and “Protestant Success in the New American City, 1870-1920;” and Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*.

*Public Practice: Belonging and Attending.* Figure 8 shows long-term trends in church membership and attendance as reported to the Gallup and Roper Polls. The top series shows the proportion of respondents who answered “yes” when asked if they “happen[ed] to be a member of a church or synagogue;” the bottom series shows the proportion of respondents who answered “yes” when asked if they “happen[ed] to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days, or not?”<sup>45</sup> The findings should be taken with some reservation, because, as we noted earlier, respondents sometimes exaggerate membership and attendance (and religiously active people more often answer surveys). Also, the results for the earliest years should be taken with special reservation, because polling methods were not as accurate then.<sup>46</sup> But the long-term trends, rather than the absolute numbers, are what interest us here.

Two general impressions emerge from the data: One, there has not been much change in the last half-century in either membership or attendance, at least relative to seasonal fluctuations. Americans reported membership rates in the low 70% range around 1950 and in the high 60% range in the late 1990s; Americans reported weekly attendance in the high 40% range in the mid-1950s and in the low 40% range in the late 1990s. Two, the marginal changes we can observe suggest that membership and attendance rose to a peak in the 1950s, declined in the 1960s and 1970s, and then leveled off in the 1990s.

---

<sup>45</sup> There are many more points at the end of each series, because published Gallup reports provided data for a few polls in each of the later years and just annual averages for the earlier years. We show those points to give the reader a sense of how much month-to-month variation there can be. The Gallup data are from the Gallup web site, “Gallup Poll Topics A-Z,” <http://www.gallup.com>, and from several early points reported by Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Figure 12. The Roper data on attendance were provided by Henry Brady. General Social Survey results point to steeper downward slope since the 1970s, but the item there is not the same; it concerns frequency of attendance (see analysis below).

<sup>46</sup> On the debate over measuring attendance, see footnote X above. On cautions about early polls, see Glenn, Review of Greeley.

## — Figure 8 —

If we try to peer back before the 1940s, we have only fragmentary data, the occasional survey here or there done with uncertain methods. But these fragments suggest that Americans in the first four decades were *less* often church members than was true later and that they attended services at rates *no higher* those of Americans in the latter half of the century. One example is, again, the classic study of “Middletown” conducted in the 1924. The researchers counted Sunday service attendees at “the forty-two religious bodies” in the fall of that year and calculated that, “although the tradition is that ‘every one goes to church’,” only 16 percent of Middletown’s white men and 25 percent of its white women attended either morning or evening services on an average Sunday. (Decades later, a follow-up study concluded that attendance rates had increased by 1977).<sup>47</sup> Such evidence reinforces the impression that church activity peaked in mid-century.

The stability in attendance, at least since the rates returned in the 1960s to pre-1950s levels, masks two countervailing trends. One, the later in the century Americans were born, the lower their attendance rates. About half of those born before 1900 were likely to have attended services in the previous week, but only about one-quarter of those born since 1960 had. But

---

<sup>47</sup> On Muncie: Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, p. 358. (The Lynds make a point about declining attendance from 1890 to 1924, but the 1890 data are retrospective reports.) Caplow et al, *Middletown Families*, in 1977, did not replicate the census method but did replicate the interviews that the Lynds also conducted. That replication showed an increase in respondents’ reports of going to church (Ch. 11; table A-11.2). Here are some of the other fragments: surveys done in New York City in 1900 reported that half of Protestants, 80% of Catholics, and 10% of Jews regularly attended services (Butler, “Protestant Success in the New American City,” p. 307); a newspaper in Providence reported in 1902 that 87% of Catholics and 69% of Protestants “claimed to attend church” (Sterne, “Bringing Religion into Working-Class History,” p. 152); in 1930 only 20% of American Jews belonged to a synagogue (by 1960, 60% did – Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, p. 159); a 1935 survey found that almost 80% of Jewish men had *not* attended services for a year (Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, p.93); and community studies of rural towns c. 1940 reported low attendance rates (e.g., Moe and Taylor, “Irwin, Iowa,” p. 61ff; MacLeish and Young, “Landaff, New Hampshire,” p. 71ff). See also estimates in Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*. However partial these numbers are, they do not fit the image of universal religiosity many people hold for the early twentieth century.

people attend more often as they age, marry, and raise children – and these roughly counterbalance the generational change. Since the average age of Americans rose (from 23 in 1900 to 30 in 1980 and to 35 in 2000), the two tendencies produced a flat trend line since the 1960s.<sup>48</sup>

The trend in attendance was, however, not flat for everyone. We pooled Gallup polls from 1957 – just about the peak of reported attendance – and 1968 with the later General Social Surveys and used the same statistical technique described in Chapter X to smooth the trend lines. Figure 9 shows that history of attendance varied greatly by religious affiliation. The real change was among Catholics: Around mid-century, roughly 80 percent reported weekly attendance, but by the end of the century, only about 40 percent did. Changes in attendance among Protestants and Jews (also among “others” and “nones” – not shown) were not statistically significant. (Catholics similarly experienced a substantial decline in attendance across *generations*.<sup>49</sup>)

GSS surveys conducted in 1991 and 1998 give us a wider, albeit tinted, window on the century. Respondents were asked, “And what about when you were around 11 or 12, how often did you attend religious services then?” Assuming that these reports are accurate, the results

---

<sup>48</sup> We pooled 1957 and 1965 Gallup Polls with the 1972 through 2000 General Social Surveys. The Gallup Polls specifically asked about attendance in the last week. The GSS asked respondents how often they attended in the course of a year, so we converted those answers into an estimated probability that a person had attended services in the previous week. Respondents who answered that they attended 2-3 times a month, nearly every week, every week, or more than once a week were coded as having attended. We chose the cut-point for the GSS (2-3 times a month) so that the resulting “yes” answer had a distribution in 1994-1996-1998 as close as possible (.407) as the Gallup Poll result for 1996 (.435) and to thereby minimize house effects. The cohort effect: In the GSS, looking only at 25-to-74-year-olds, the zero-order effect of birth year is to reduce the probability of attending by -.000438 per year. Controlling for age, marital status, and having a child at home reduces that coefficient by 77% to -.000135.

<sup>49</sup> About 2/3 of Catholics born before 1930 reported weekly attendance, but about 1/3 of those born after 1960 did.

show that between 1930 and 1960, about 80 percent of children attended regularly; attendance then dropped steadily to about 60 percent in the 1980s. If we assume instead some nostalgia – as would be suggested by the fragmentary reports of attendance in the earlier years we noted – then the drop since the 1960s was not so great. In either case, comparisons between Protestants and Catholics should not be distorted by differential tendencies to nostalgia. And these retrospective reports roughly reinforce the pattern shown in Figure 9: relatively little change in attendance among those reared as Protestants, a major decline since the ‘50s for Catholics.<sup>50</sup>

The decline in Catholic attendance we observe is consistent with studies showing that about one-third of Catholics who had been attending weekly through the years of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) became less frequent attenders immediately after the birth control encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Another ten percent or so of Catholic adults cut back on their church attendance between 1968 and 1975.<sup>51</sup> Since then, cohorts socialized into the less rigorous regime of occasional attendance have replaced the cohorts that maintained high standards of attendance, leading to a slow but steady decrease in weekly attendance rates for Catholics. Largely because of the Catholic trend, the data also show a *convergence* among the larger

---

<sup>50</sup> The pattern of reported attendance at age 12 for Protestants and Catholics is a little more complex. This table summarizes the key periods and the differential reports of attending at least 2 or 3 times a month during the middle of each period:

	<u>1920s</u>	<u>Depression</u>	<u>Post-War ('46-'60)</u>	<u>1980s</u>
Raised Protestant	72%	85%	79%	67%
Raised Catholic	93	83	93	69

The Depression (and World War II) seemed to boost Protestant kids' attendance; Protestant attendance dropped about 12 points from the '50s to the '80s, Catholic attendance dropped 24 points. (The number of other respondents was too small for accurate estimates.) These numbers are based on the 1991 and 1998 GSS surveys and 11-year moving averages.

<sup>51</sup>Hout and Greeley, "The Center Doesn't Hold."

religious groups over the years (and over generations) in rates of attendance.

– Figure 9 –

While Protestants who identified with conservative denominations were more likely than liberal ones to attend services in any given week, there is no evidence of greater or lesser change in attendance for one or the other type of denomination. Methodist churches might not be as full as they used to be and the Pentecostal and Baptists churches are presumably fuller, but that is because there are fewer of the first and more of the latter. The only noteworthy exception to the overall flat attendance trend lines for Protestants was a regional convergence: Attendance among Southern Protestants dropped toward the level of Protestants in other regions. Looking at change across birth cohorts reveals a *convergence* in *Protestants'* attendance patterns across a variety of traits, with the possible exception of parents versus non-parents.<sup>52</sup>

Sociologist Mark Chaves aptly called the church, even in the late twentieth century, “America’s principal site of culture creation” and the changes in attendance we have reviewed here over the last half of that century are variations on a comparatively – by international and historical levels – high level of involvement. The main source of change in religious change during the last third was the sudden drop-off and subsequent further erosion in Catholic church attendance. Summarizing trends in church attendance from 1940 to 1985, Hout and Greeley

---

<sup>52</sup> We regressed probability of attending (recoded from the multiple responses noted in an earlier footnote) on year of birth, age, sex, race, size of community (4 categories), region of the country (4 categories), education (3 categories), and whether the respondent had a child at home. Birth year was no longer significant for the base population, but five interaction effects with birth year were significant: blacks, women, Southerners (negatively), Westerners, and respondents with children at home (positively). All but the latter interaction effects suggested a convergence in attendance patterns across lines of cleavage.

wrote: “Contrary to received wisdom in social science and the mass media, we could find no evidence of religious secularization as measured by the attendance at religious services in the United States over the past half-century. The downward trend in church attendance in the late 1960s and early 1970s was strictly a Catholic phenomenon.”<sup>53</sup> We concur. The last 15 years of the last century showed that Hout and Greeley were too optimistic about Catholic attendance by a few percentage points (they said it had stopped dropping by 1975), but their sense that other groups were unchanged and unchanging is borne out here. Some researchers, most notably political scientist Robert Putnam, have looked at data very similar to ours and reached more an extreme conclusion. In Putnam’s words, churches are “hollowed out;” “decay has consumed the load-bearing beams of our civic infrastructure.”<sup>54</sup> His conclusion grossly exaggerates the condition of American religious participation. He sees what we have characterized as tenuous and problematic evidence of religious increase in the 1950s a “religious boom” and the subsequent return to pre-1950s levels as “erosion.” Those are very heavy terms to lay on but two 1950s surveys done in the early history of polling.<sup>55</sup> And social scientists know well that the 1950s were exceptional years in a few respects, hardly a benchmark for “normal” America. We conclude that the key trend in attendance over the last half-century or more has been the decline in Catholic attendance to the level of that of mainline Protestants.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup>“The Center Doesn’t Hold,” p. 341.

<sup>54</sup>*Bowling Alone*, p. 72.

<sup>55</sup> And ones tainted by technical problems – the most obvious being a total lack of respondents who expressed a preference for no religion, although this may be a matter of question-wording.

<sup>56</sup> We also analyzed answers to the survey question, How often do you pray? Unfortunately, we only have that data for a 17-year window, 1983-2000. The proportion of American who prayed at least daily stayed between 50% and 60%. But generations differed. Eighty percent of respondents born around 1900 said they prayed at least daily, but only about 42%

*Believing.* The most basic religious belief, of course, is belief in God. In the last half of the twentieth century, over 90% of Americans answered “yes” to the question, “Do you, personally, believe in God (or a universal spirit)?” or a question like it. Affirmative answers were especially high in the 1950s and declined slightly afterwards: from 99% in a 1954 survey to 91% in 1993 and 93% in 2000.<sup>57</sup> Part of the reason for the modest decline was the replacement of earlier-born believers by later-born nonbelievers, but there was also a modest drop within generations between the 1950s and 1990s. Catholics and especially Jews were slightly less likely to say yes over time. But all these changes in believing in God are within a very narrow range, at 90-plus percent for Protestants and Catholics.

We can further explore belief in God by using a question that the GSS included from 1988 to 2000, when they asked respondents to choose one of six options, from “I don’t believe in God” and “I don’t whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out” to “While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God” and “I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.” In the short 12-year window, 65% of Americans, give or take 2 points, gave the “I have no doubts” reply. (Across birth cohorts, certainty in God declined – notably among Catholics – until the baby boomer generation born between 1945 and 1959 and then stabilized.)

---

of those born around 1970 reported that difference. Age and year of birth correlate at  $-.94$  across the GSS samples in this short span and the former accounts for most, perhaps all but a small residual, of the cohort effect. Over the 17-year window, rural Americans, southerners, Protestants and parents increased their praying relative to the comparison group. Latinos decreased theirs. Importantly, the college-educated raised their rates of praying to nearly the level of high school graduates.

<sup>57</sup> The decline from the 1960s on was true only for whites.

Certainty about God increased slightly among college graduates.<sup>58</sup> This item is much better than the simple “yes or no” approach to belief in God from the Gallup polls, but its greater sophistication has not turned up any notable change in this brief period. We also found published results from two earlier time points: 1964 and 1981.<sup>59</sup> In 1964, 77 percent of Americans believed in God without doubt – compared with the average of 65 percent for the 1988-2000 GSS. Most of the shift between the 1964 and 1988 responses is into the “I have doubts” option. As the percentage of Americans saying that they believe without doubt went down by 12 points, the percentage who said that, though they have doubts, they do believe went up by 10 points. (The percentage saying that they do not believe in God went up from 1 to 5 percent).<sup>60</sup> Here we have evidence that a segment of American society changed their outlook on God as well as religion in the 1960s. Unfortunately we have no points from the late 1960s or the 1970s to see more precisely when the change occurred and how sudden or gradual it was.

A higher threshold of doctrinal belief concerns the *literalness of the Bible*: Is it the “actual word of God,” inspired by God, or just fables? Surveys using one version of this question revealed that in the mid-1960s 53% of adult Americans, on average, picked the “actual word” answer, and that in the mid-1980s, 49% did.<sup>61</sup> Surveys using a different question found that in the

---

<sup>58</sup> We dichotomized the GSS measure as “have no doubts” versus other answers in a regression model. There is a small positive year effect and small negative cohort effect and a significant interaction of year X college graduate. Generational differences were sharper, most especially for Catholics.

<sup>59</sup>From Bishop, “Americans’ Belief in God.”

<sup>60</sup>The 1981 percentage of 63 percent is on the low side of the GSS percentages.

<sup>61</sup> This is the National Election Survey and the question was, “Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your views about the Bible -- the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word, the Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, or the Bible is an ancient book of

decade around 1980 38% of respondents picked literalism, and about 15 years later, around 1995, about 33% did.<sup>62</sup> (The “fables” reply increased about 4 points, from 12% to 16%.) Together, these polls suggest a roughly 9-point drop from the 1960s to the 1990s in the proportion of Americans who believed in Bible literalism. The most striking change in group differences from 1984 to 2000, when the GSS asked this question, is the closing of the educational gap. The proportion of high school dropouts who were literalists dropped from about 60% to about 50%, but the proportion of college graduates increased from around 12% to around 18%. Cohort patterns capture the longer-term changes. Using the GSS samples drawn from 1984 to 2000, we found that about 50% of Americans born around the turn of the last century were literalists; that proportion declined steadily to the end of World War II, down to about 30%; and the proportion remained there through the Baby Boomers and the children of the early Baby Boomers, those born from 1946 through 1980. Closer inspection shows that the generational differences were largely due to two factors: One, Americans were increasingly educated, which reduces literalism, and two, over the century, high school dropouts increasingly turned away from literalism. (See Figure 10.) We thus see a convergence of opinion; most strikingly because literalism increased

---

fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man?” The NES asked a different version of the question in 1996.

<sup>62</sup> Within both periods noted in this sentence, there was little net change. The data are from the Gallup Poll (“Gallup Brian,” [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com), accessed 5 November 2004) for 1976-1998 and the GSS, 1984-2000. The common question was: “Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? a. The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; b. The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; c. The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.” Although the early years of this series are Gallup only, the three overlap years, in the 1990s show virtually identical results. We are excluding a published Gallup data point, for 1963, with a 65% “literal” reply. Although occasionally cited, this fugitive report is probably an error – see Duncan, “Facile Reporting.”

slightly among college graduates born after 1930.<sup>63</sup>

– Figure 10 –

Finally, we consider whether Americans believed in *life after death*. From 1944 through the early 1990s, around 72% of Americans answered “yes” when asked if they believed in life after death; in the last years of the twentieth century, the average *rose* to about 77%.<sup>64</sup> Generational differences also point to no change or slightly increasing belief over the century.<sup>65</sup>

Different types of Americans largely *converged* toward belief in the afterlife. Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Americans who professed no religion shifted toward the level of conviction held by fundamentalist Protestants. For example, before the 1970s, fewer than 20 percent of Jews and fewer than 40 percent of respondents who claimed no religion expressed belief in an afterlife; at the end of the century, about 50 and 60 percent respectively of both did. (This upswell of belief appears as well if we group people by the religion they were raised in rather than the one they currently claimed.) Non-Southerners increased their level of belief to about that of Southerners. And residents of metropolitan areas became more like rural residents in having faith. The one noteworthy exception is the category of poorly-educated Americans, as show in Figure 11. Fewer high school dropouts believed in life after death in the 1990s than in

---

<sup>63</sup> In regression analyses, controlling for many background characteristics and year effects, changing educational attainments account for about 6 of the 15-point drop in literalness between the entire 1910 and 1940 cohorts. The interaction effect of year of birth X not graduating high school accounts for 6 more of the 15-point drop.

<sup>64</sup> This summary is based on replies to Gallup and GSS surveys simply asking, “Do you believe in life after death?” In 1995 and 2000, the percentages were 80 and 82 (1998 was 72).

<sup>65</sup> Using the GSS sample, the percentage believing ranged from a low of 77% for those born about 1913 to highs of 81% for those born around 1900, 1960, and 1980.

around 1960; Americans of higher educational attainments, however, especially college graduates, were notably more likely to believe at the end than at the middle of the century. It is almost as if the least educated had missed out on a new social wave, belief in the afterlife.<sup>66</sup>

— Figure 11 —

*Conclusion.* We have examined closely four indicators of religious involvement, in addition to quickly looking at church membership: weekly attendance at services, believing in God, in the literalness of the Bible, and in life after death. The first question we raised was: What happened to religious belief and practice in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? For the most part, the historical changes were modest, generally faith and practice increased a bit in the 1950s and then declined a bit afterwards. Overall, indicators of religiosity did not decline much (if at all) over the last several decades of the century. This surface consistency, however, covers some internal variations.

There were generational differences: Americans born around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were much more religiously active and religiously certain as adults than those born in the 1960s and 1970s (excepting belief in life after death); much of that, however, reflects the connection between aging and religiosity. Comparing people of a similar age across the years reveals remarkable stability in religious belief and practice.

Clearer differences appear between Catholics and Protestants: Catholics clearly retreated

---

<sup>66</sup>Generational patterns were similar to the period patterns, but the latter were more robust. These interaction effects held up in large regression equations with one notable exception: When main effects and other interaction effects are held constant, the trend line for Catholics is negative, becoming *less* believing than Protestants.

from religious attendance and the this accounts for most of the overall trend in attendance. Furthermore, this was almost certainly connected to internal changes in Catholicism, not their adoption of ideas or practices typical of Protestants. And its consequence was to homogenize attendance rates over time. Even more consistently across the measures, college graduates' religious practice and beliefs *increased* over time relative to others. Given that frequently, the religiosity of those with less than a high school degree declined, this generally meant a *convergence* in religiosity among different educational groups.<sup>67</sup>

Stepping back from the survey data, the homogenization of religious beliefs and practices is a common experience for American immigrant groups. Historians of Catholicism and Judaism in America have noted how leaders and laity “Americanized” both faiths – often with tension between the already assimilated members of the group and newer arrivals.<sup>68</sup> For Jews Americanization entailed adopting Protestant organizational structures (for example, congregational democracy) and service practices (e.g., forms of congregational singing). The founders of Reform Judaism in the late nineteenth-century explicitly wanted to assimilate and renounced separatist practices such as Kosher food and head coverings for men, adopted “American” customs such as Sunday services and choirs, and embraced the Social Gospel.

---

<sup>67</sup> To systematically and simply assess these patterns we ran the following simple regression models. The dependent variables were dichotomies for frequent attendance, frequent prayer, being sure about God, literalism, and belief in the afterlife. The predictors were year and dummies for Protestant, Catholic, high school graduate, some college, college graduate, plus interaction terms for Catholic by year and college graduate by year. The results indicate that Catholics' attendance and prayer declined over time relative to others; and that the college grad's attendance, prayer, literalism and belief in the afterlife increased over time relative to the others. We ran the same models replacing year of survey with year of the respondent's birth. The Catholic x birth year interaction was (negatively) significant only for attendance. The college grad X birth year interaction was (positively) significant for all five measures.

<sup>68</sup> A vivid example is the conflict between Italian immigrants and the Irish hierarchy in New York in Robert A. Orsi's *Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*.

Catholics initially chose to construct a parallel but separate social world of schools, universities, hospitals, and communities. As the century of mass media unfolded there were Catholic newspapers and magazines, radio and television programs, and book publishers.<sup>69</sup> The separatist policies were dramatically reversed by the Second Vatican Council. Although Catholic institutions continued to function (and most thrived) following Vatican II, the express policy of pursuing a Catholic separatism in the United States was ended. The United States remained a special case in the Vatican's eyes, however. Not accustomed to pluralism, the Roman hierarchy tried to comprehend the situation of the American church. For example, they struggled for over a century with Catholic bishops to find divorce policies that would work in the American context. Americans have won exceptions and some adaptations,<sup>70</sup> but remarriage following divorce is the single largest reason that contemporary Catholics leave the Church.<sup>71</sup> A century later, leaders of Asian immigrant communities are similarly adapting Bhuddism and Confucianism to America, as the model of regularly scheduled religious services presided over by a member of a professional clergy who gives an address on matters of religious interest and leads collective prayer spreads ever more widely.<sup>72</sup>

In the end, Americans in the twentieth century for most part retained their characteristic religiosity. And, even as the nation's religious structure became more differentiated, its religious culture may have become more homogenous in both practice and belief. Ironically, Americans in

---

<sup>69</sup> See Morris, *American Catholic*, and Massa, *Catholics and American Culture*.

<sup>70</sup> Wilde, "Marketing Divorce Through Annulments."

<sup>71</sup> Hout, "Angry and Alienated: Divorced and Remarried Catholics in the U.S."

<sup>72</sup> See Yang and Ebaugh (2001) and Chaves (1999).

the twentieth century seemed to have become more divided in religious affiliation, but more united in religious faith.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bishop, George. 1999. "Americans' Belief in God." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63: 421-434.
- Bryce, James Bryce, Viscount. 1995 [1888]. *The American Commonwealth, Vol. II*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund.
- Butler, Jon. 1979. "Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600-1760." *American Historical Review* 84 (April):317-46.
- Butler, Jon. 1990. *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Butler, Jon. 1997. "Protestant Success in the New American City, 1870-1920." Pp. 296-333 in Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (eds.), *New Directions in American Religious History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Jon. 2000. *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Caplow, Theodore. 1985. "Contrasting Trends in European and American Religion." *Sociological Analysis* 46 (Summer): 101-08.
- Caplow, Theodore, and Howard M. Bahr. 1979. "Half a Century of Change in Adolescent Attitudes: Replication of a Middletown Survey by the Lynds." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 43 (Spring):1-17.
- Caplow, Theodore, Howard M. Bahr, Bruce A. Chadwick, Rueben Hill, and Margaret Holmes Williamson. 1982. *Middletown Families: Fifty Years of Change and Continuity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Caplow, Theodore, Howard M. Bahr, Bruce A. Chadwick, and Dwight W. Hoover. 1983. *All Faithful People Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press.
- Dolan, Jay P. 1992. *The American Catholic Experience from Colonial Times to the Present*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Duncan, Otis Dudley. 2003. "Facile Reporting: The Supposed Decline in Biblical Literalism." *Public Perspectives* (May/June):40-3.
- Erie, Steven P. 1988. *Rainbow's End: Irish-Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1985*. Berkeley : University of California Press.
- Feingold, Henry L. 1992. *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Finke, Roger, and Rodney Stark. 1992. *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Glenn, Norvall. 1990. Review of Greeley, *Religious Change in America*. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 54 (Fall):444-7.
- Greeley, Andrew. 1991. "American Exceptionalism: The Religious Phenomenon." In Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *Is America Different?: A New Look at American Exceptionalism*. Oxford, Eng. Clarendon Press: 94-115.
- Hadaway, C. Kirk, Penny Marler, and Mark Chaves. 1993. "What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance." *American Sociological Review* 58 (December):741-752.
- Halman and Ruud de Moor, "Religion, Churches and Moral Values"
- Hays, Samuel P. 1964. *Response to Industrialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Herberg, Will. 1983 (1960). *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. Chicago :

University of Chicago Press.

Hout, Michael. 2000. "Angry and Alienated: Divorced and Remarried Catholics in the U.S." *America* (16 December): 10ff.

Hout, Michael, and Claude S. Fischer. 2002. "Explaining the Rise of Americans with No Religious Preference: Politics and Generation." *American Sociological Review* 67 (April): 165-90.

Hout, Michael, and Andrew Greeley, 1987. "The Center Doesn't Hold." *American Sociological Review* 52: 325-345.

Hout, Michael, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde. 2001. "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change: The Case of American Protestants." *American Journal of Sociology* 107: .

Hunter, James D. 1991. *The Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.

Hunter, James D. 1987. *American Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kalmijn, Matthijs. 1998. "Intermarriage and Homogamy: Causes, Patterns, Trends." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24:395-421.

Lehrer, Evelyn L. 1998. "Religious Intermarriage in the United States: Determinants and Trends." *Social Science Research* 27: 245-263.

Lieberson, Stanley. 1980. *A Piece of the Pie*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Lynd, Robert, and Helen Lynd. 1929. *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.

MacLeish, Kenneth, and Kimball Young. 1942. "Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Landaff, New Hampshire." *Rural Life Studies* 3, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U.S.D.A.

Manza, Jeff, and Clem Brooks. 2000. *Social Cleavages and Political Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marty, Martin. 1984. *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of American Religion*. Boston : Little, Brown.

Massa, Mark S. 1999. *Catholics and American Culture*. Crossroad.

Moe, Edward O., and Carl C. Taylor. 1942. "Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Irwin, Iowa." *Rural Life Studies*: 5. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U.S.D.A.

Moon, Dawne. 2004. *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press.

Morris, Charles. 1997. *American Catholic*. Times Books.

Musleah, Rahel. 2001. "Jewish Jeopardy." *Reform Judaism* (Fall): 18-22.

Niebuhr, Gustav. 2001. "Studies Suggest Lower Count For Number of U.S. Muslims." *New York Times*, 25 October.

Nobles, "Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 1750-1800." *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Ser. 46 (October): 641-70.

Orsi, Robert A. 1985. *Madonna of 115th Street*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Pew Research Center. 2002. "Americans Struggle with Religion's Role At Home and Abroad." Report of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 20 March. Online: [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org) (Accessed 11 October, 2004).

Public Agenda. 2003. *For Goodness' Sake: Why So Many Americans Want Religion to Play a Greater Role in Public Life*. On-line: <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/religion/religion.htm> (Accessed 21 August, 2003).

Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon &

Schuster.

Roof, Wade Clark. 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Shapiro, Edward S. 1992. *A Time for Healing: American Jewry Since World War II*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sherkkat, Darren. 1999. "Religious Switching." *Social Forces*

Sherkat, Darren. 1999. "Dynamics and Composition of 'Other' Religions in the GSSs, 1973-1996." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*

Smith, Tom. 1992. "Religious Beliefs and Behaviors and the Televangelist Scandals of 1987-88." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56 (Fall):360-80.

Smith, Tom W., and Seokho Kim. 2004. "The Vanishing Protestant Majority." *GSS Social Change Report No. 49*. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, April.

Smith, Tom W. 2002. "Religious Diversity in America: The Emergence of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Others." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41(3): 577-85.

Sterne, Evelyn Savidge. 2000. "Bringing Religion into Working-Class History." *Social Science History* 24(Spring):149-82.

Sutton, John R., and Mark Chaves. 2004. "Explaining Schism in American Protestant Denominations, 1890-1990." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (June):171-190.

Waite, Linda J., and Judith Sheps. 1994. "The Impact of Religious Upbringing and Marriage Markets on Jewish Inter-marriage." Manuscript, Population Research Center, University of Chicago (April).

Winseman, Albert L. 2004. "Eternal Destinations: Americans Believe in Heaven, Hell." Gallup Poll. Online: [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com) (Accessed 25 May).

Wuthnow, Robert. 1988. *The Restructuring of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Yang, Fenggang, and Helen Rose Ebaugh. 2001. "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications." *American Sociological Review* 66: 269-288.

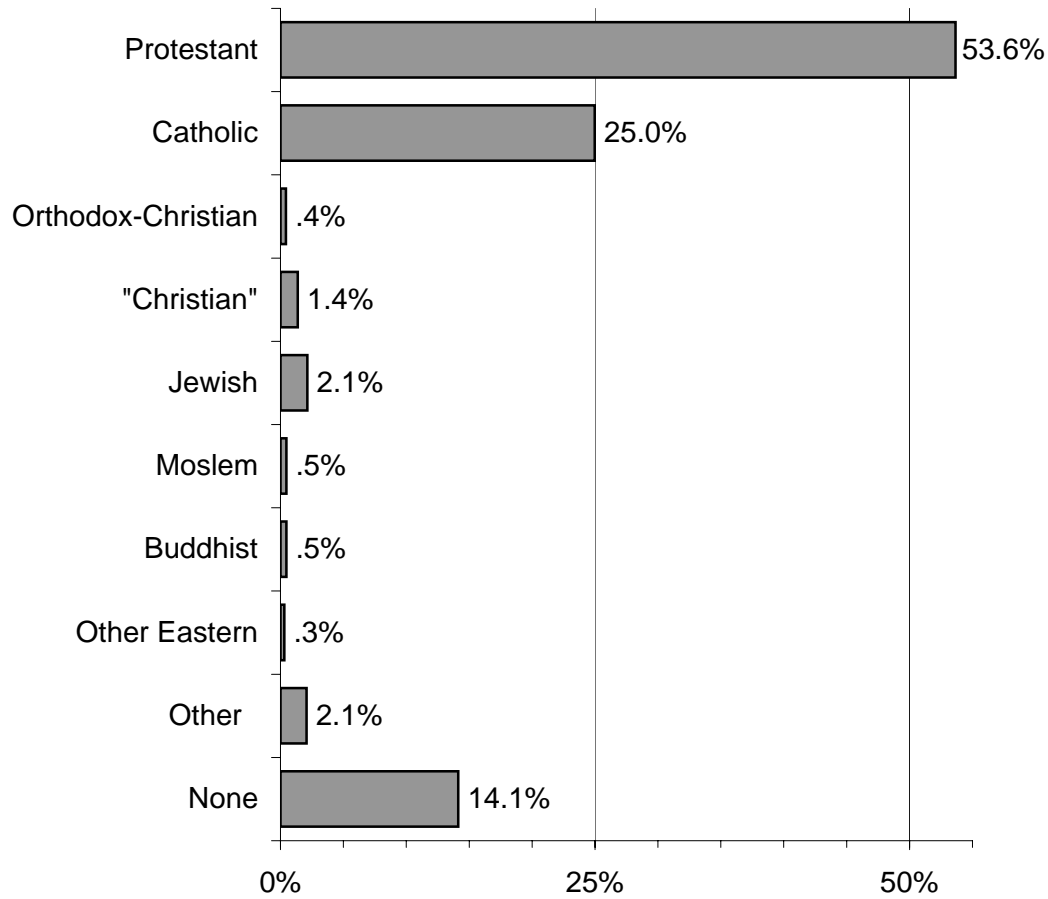


Figure 1. Percentage of American Adults with Each Religious Preference: 25-74-year olds, 1998-2000  
Source: General Social Survey

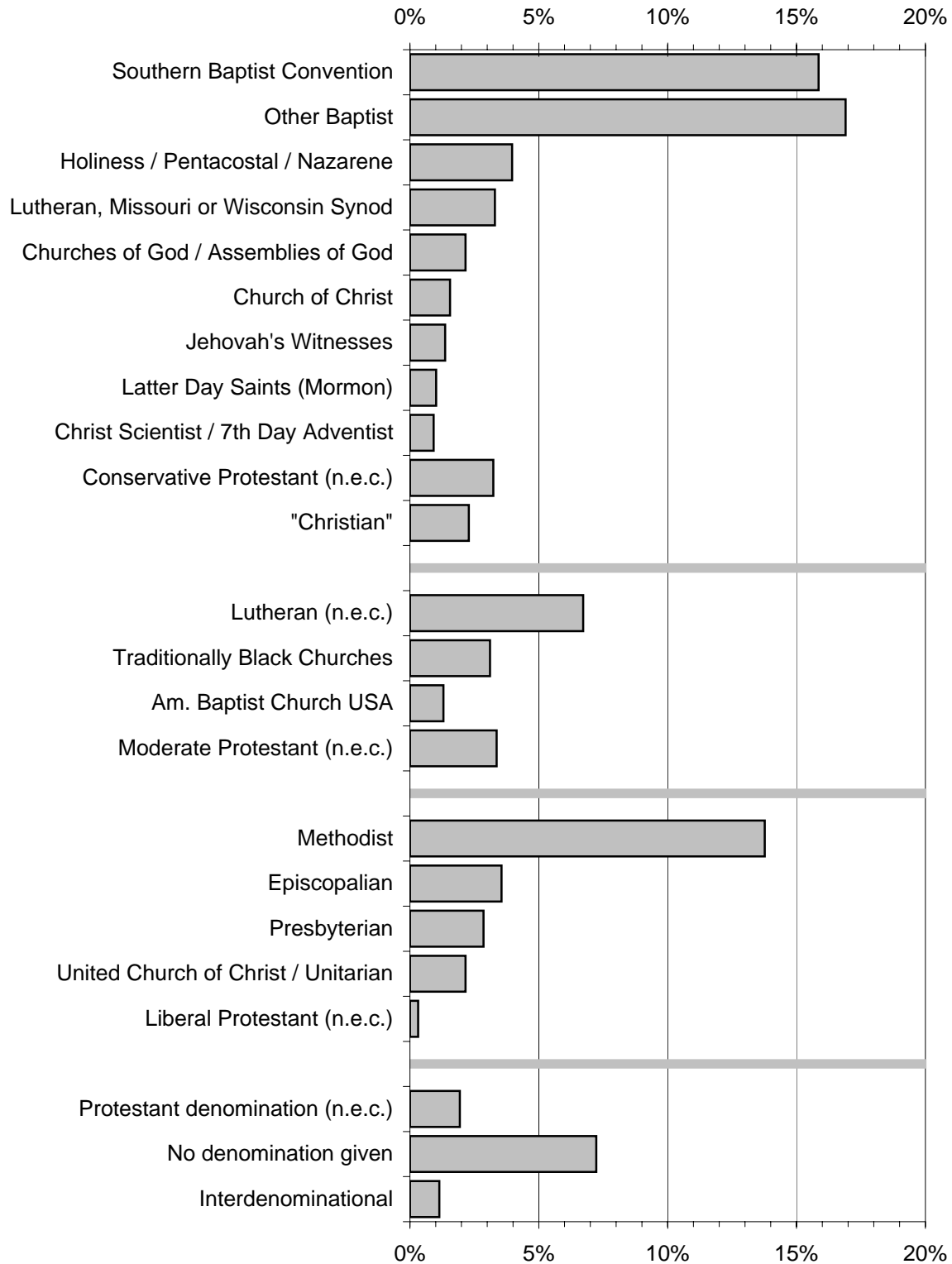


Figure 2. Percentage of Protestant Adults with Each Denominational Preference: 25-74-year olds, 1998-2000  
 Source: General Social Survey

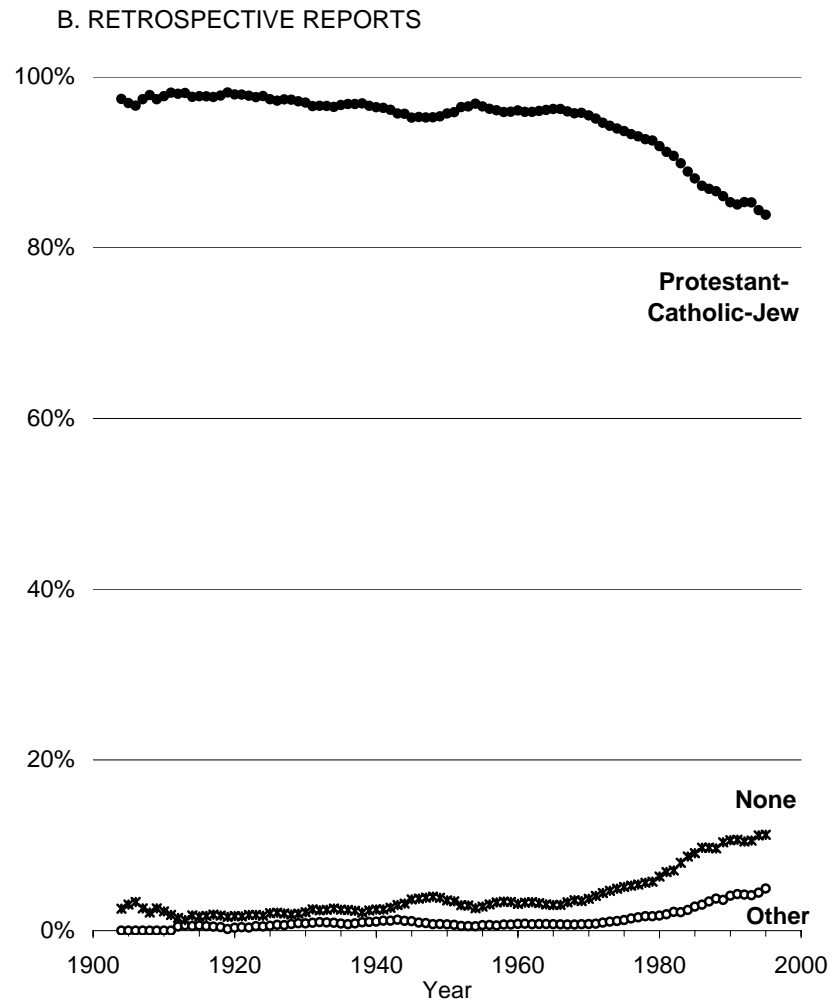
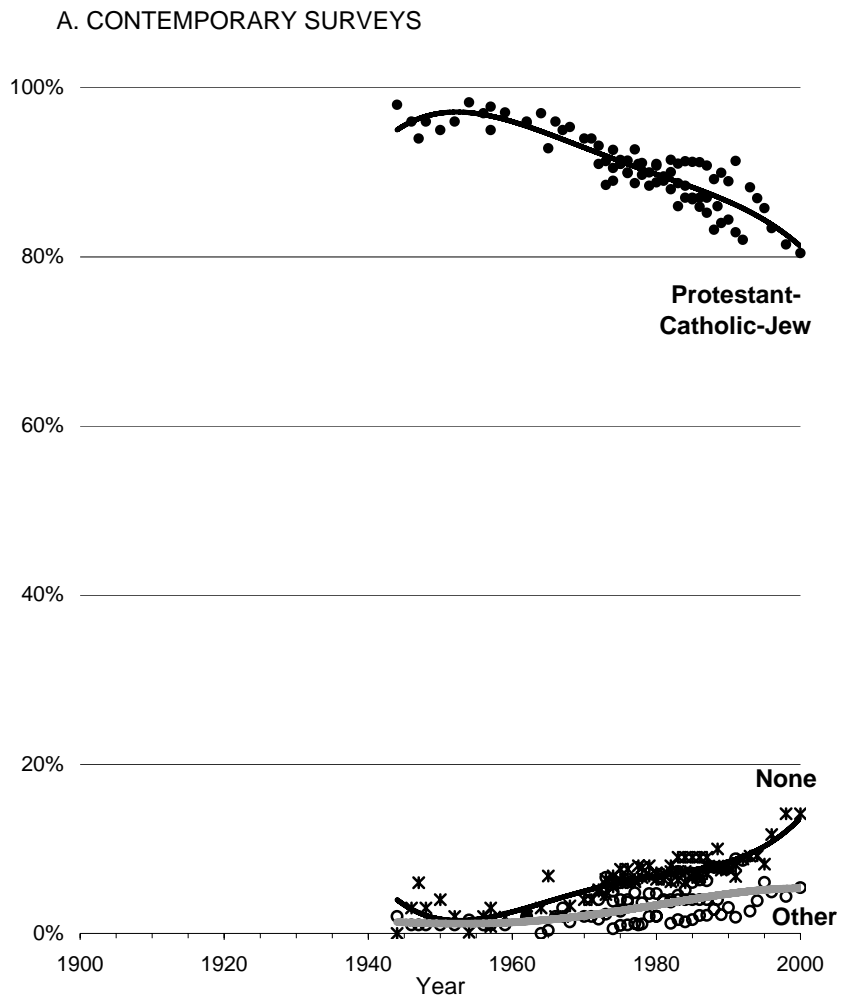


Figure 3. Americans' Religious Affiliations, by Major Categories: (A) Contemporary Surveys, 1944-2000; (B) Reports of Respondents' Childhood Religions by the Year They Turned 16 (7-year moving averages).  
Sources: (A) Gallup, Roper, NORC, and General Social Surveys; (B) General Social Survey, 1998-2000.

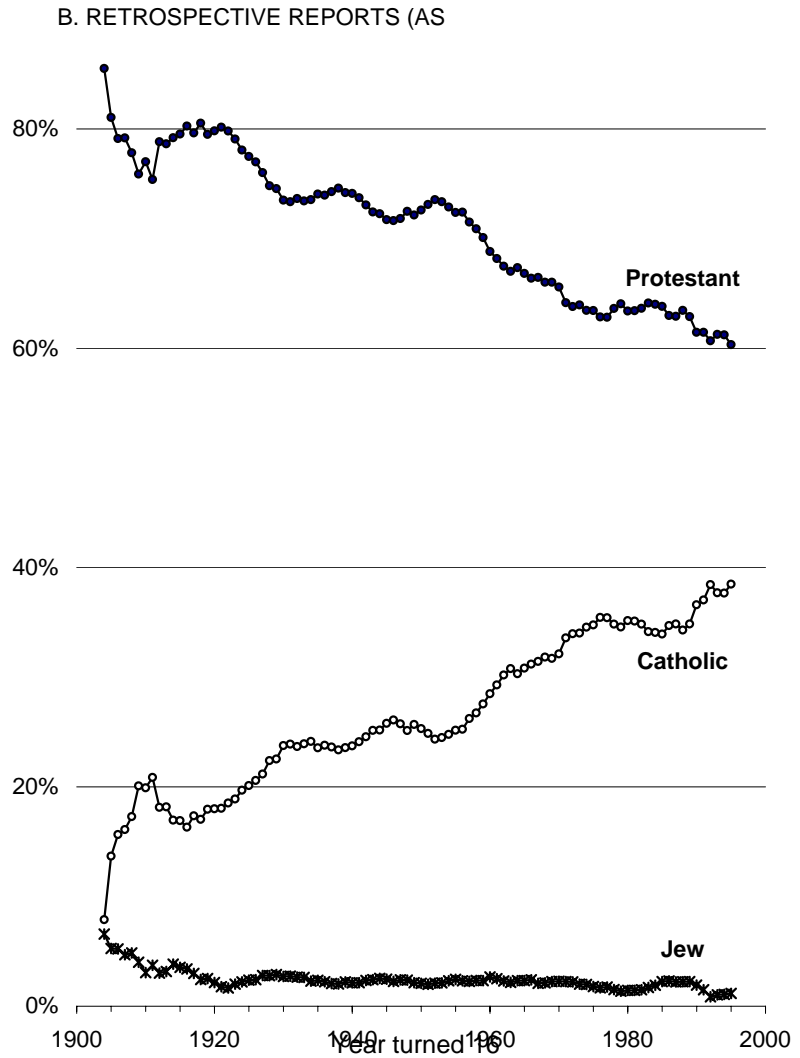
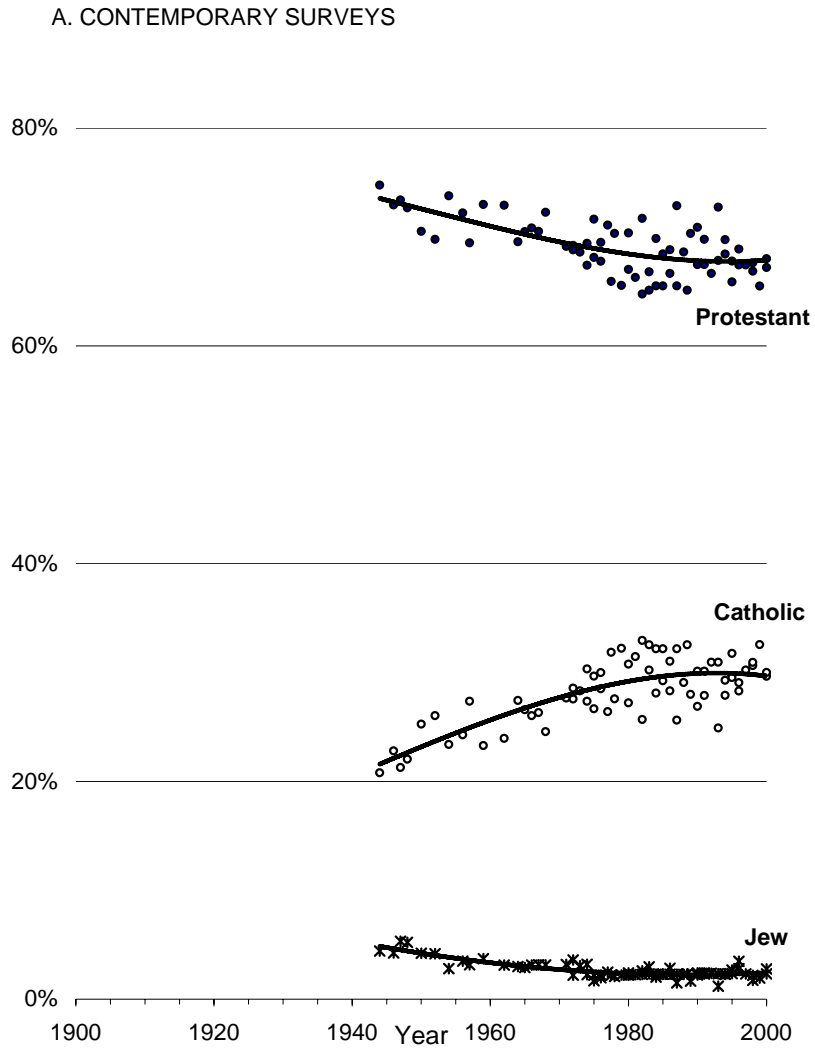


Figure 4. Americans' Religious Affiliations, by Protestant, Catholic, or Jew: (A) Contemporary Surveys, 1944-2000; (B) Reports of Respondents' Childhood Religions by the Year They Turned 16 (7-year moving averages).

Sources: (A) Gallup, Roper, NORC, and General Social Surveys; (B) General Social Survey, 1998-2000.

Note: Respondents with "no" or "other" religion excluded from these figures.

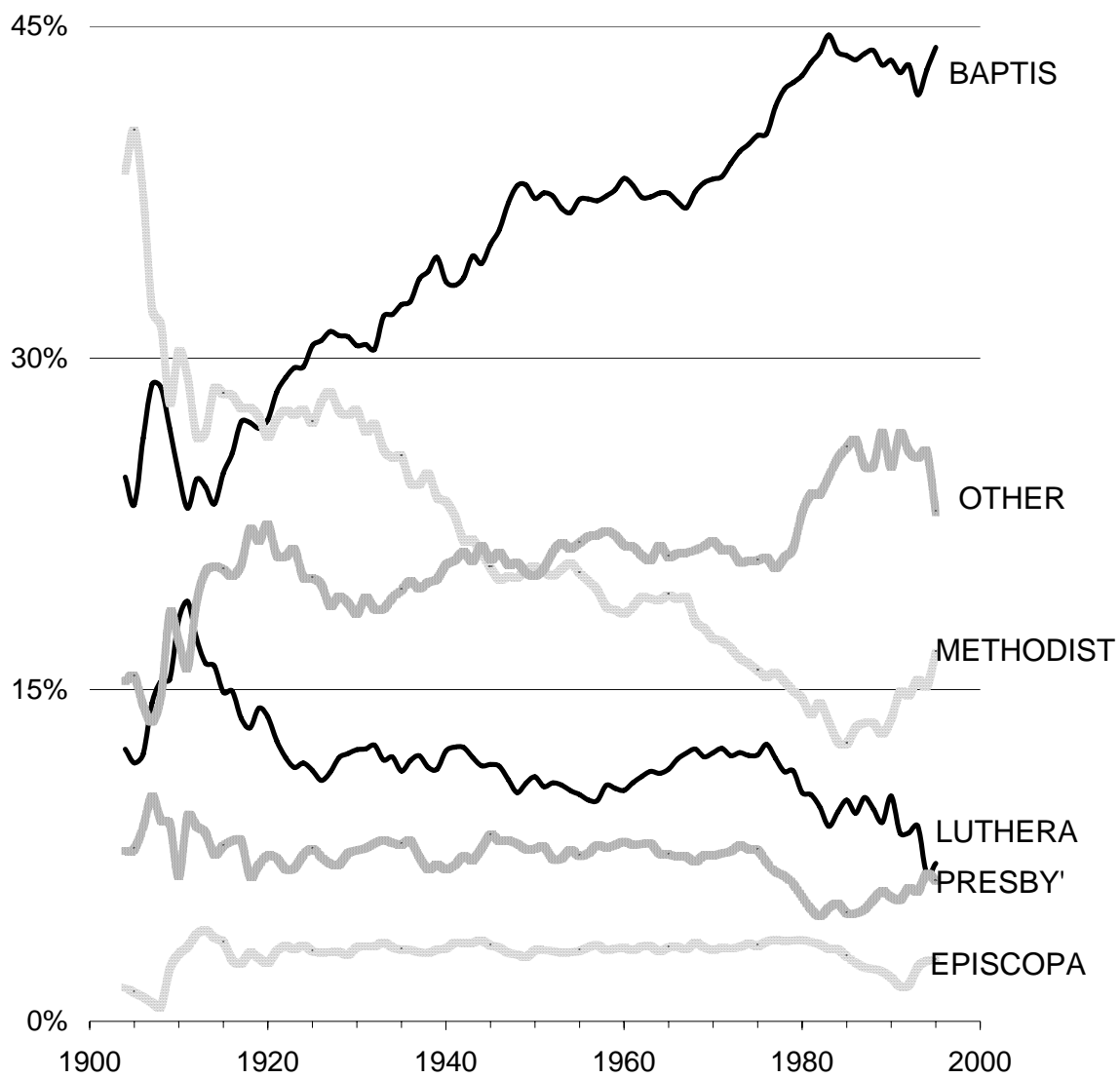


Figure 5. Denominational Distribution of Adults Raised Protestant by Year They Turned 16 Years Old

Source: General Social Survey, 1998-2000.

Note: Data smoothed by 7-year moving average.

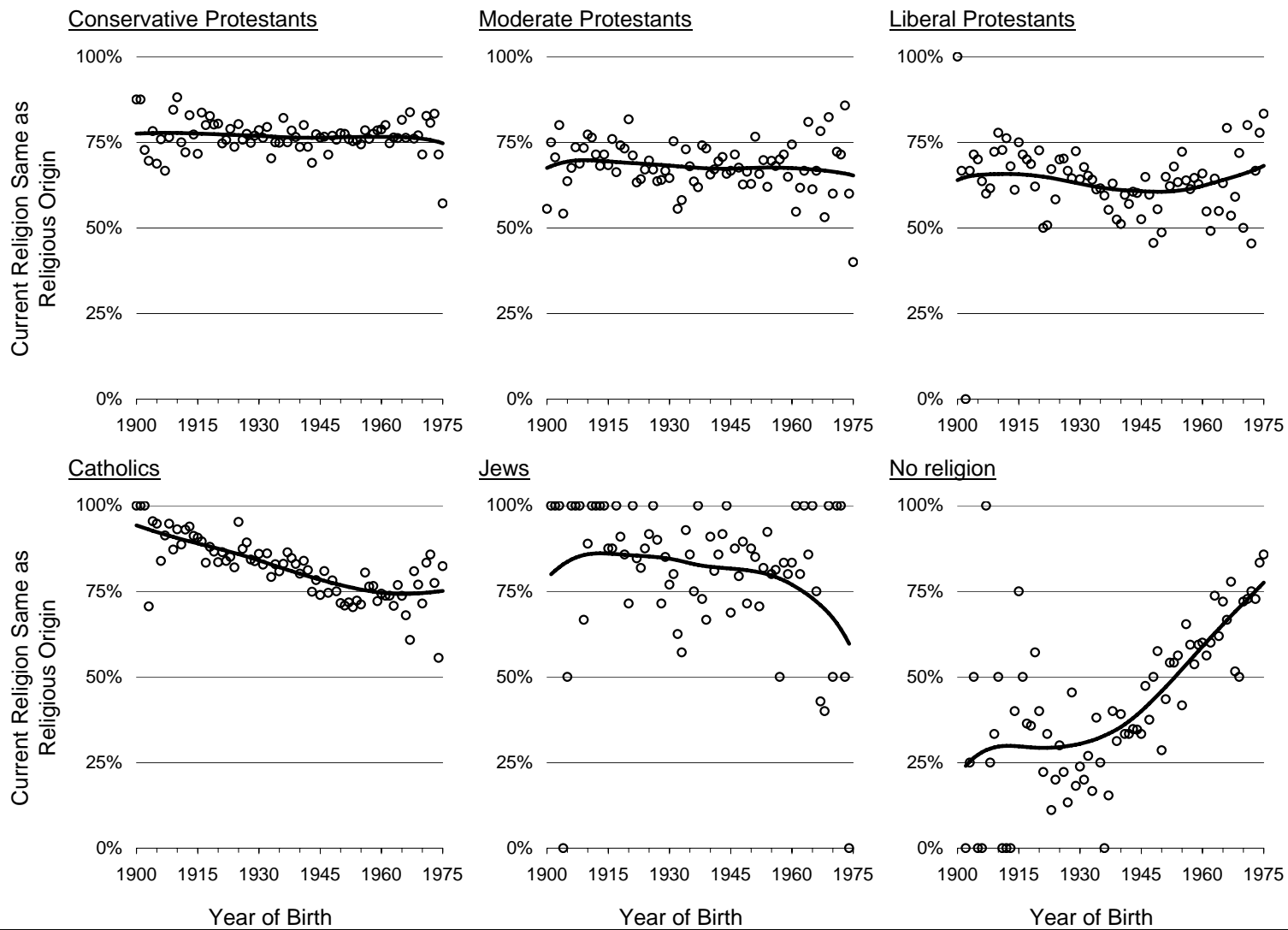


Figure 6.

Percentage of Adults Who Currently Prefer the Religion They Were Raised In: Persons 25-74 Years Old

Source: General Social Survey

Note: Circles indicate the observed percentages; the lines are smoothed by loess regression (bw=.8).

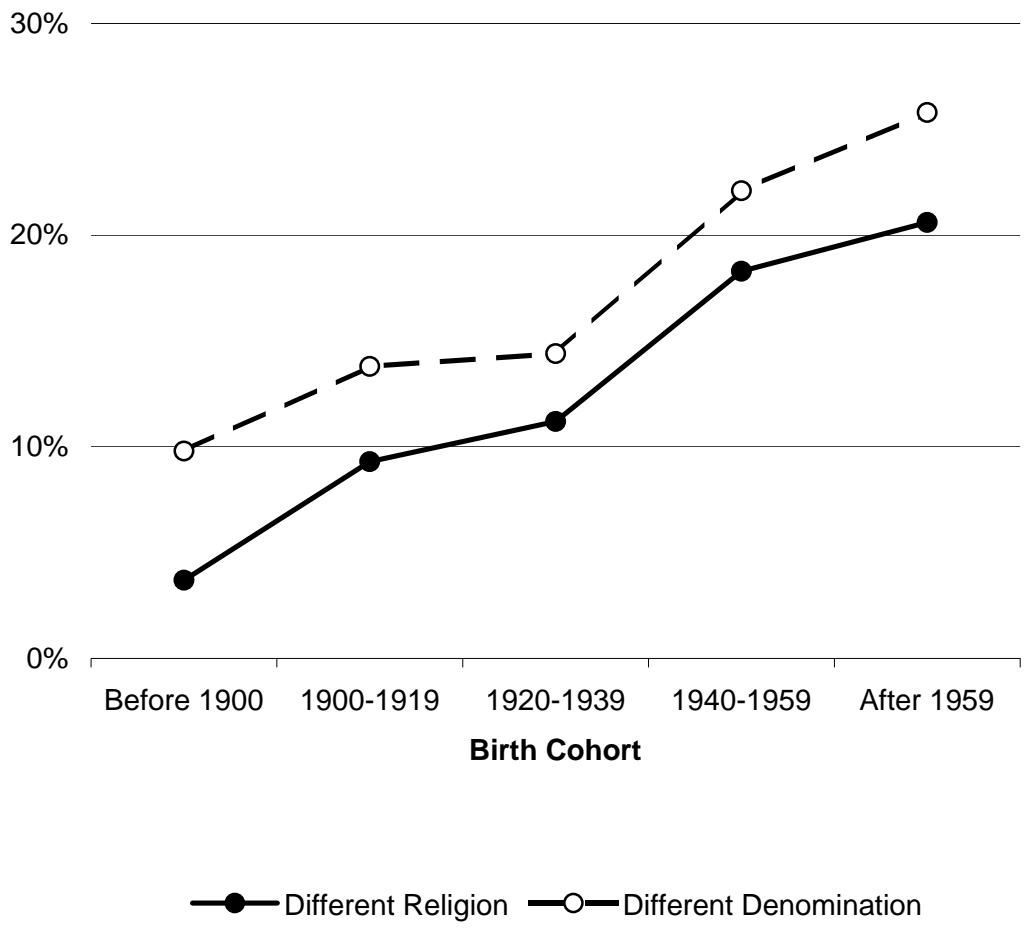


Figure 7. Percentage of Married Couples with Different Religions (Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish) or Different Denomination for Protestants, by Birth Cohort

Source: General Social Survey, 1974-1994.

**Percentage Reporting That They Were Members of a Church and Reporting Attendance at Church in Prior Week, 1937-2000**

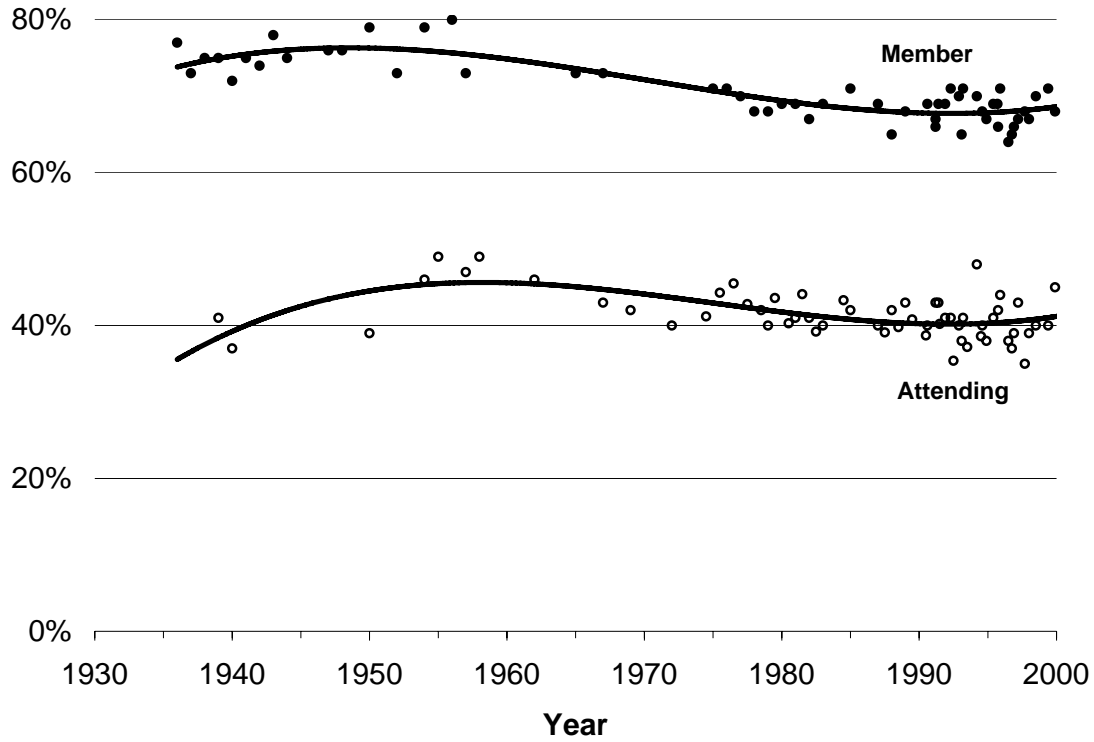


Figure 8. Percentage of Americans Reporting That They Were Members of a Church and Percentage Reporting Attendance at Church in Prior Week by Year, 1937-2000

Sources: Membership (Gallup polls); Attendance (Gallup and Roper).

Note: points are observed marginals from national polls; lines are cubic smoothers.

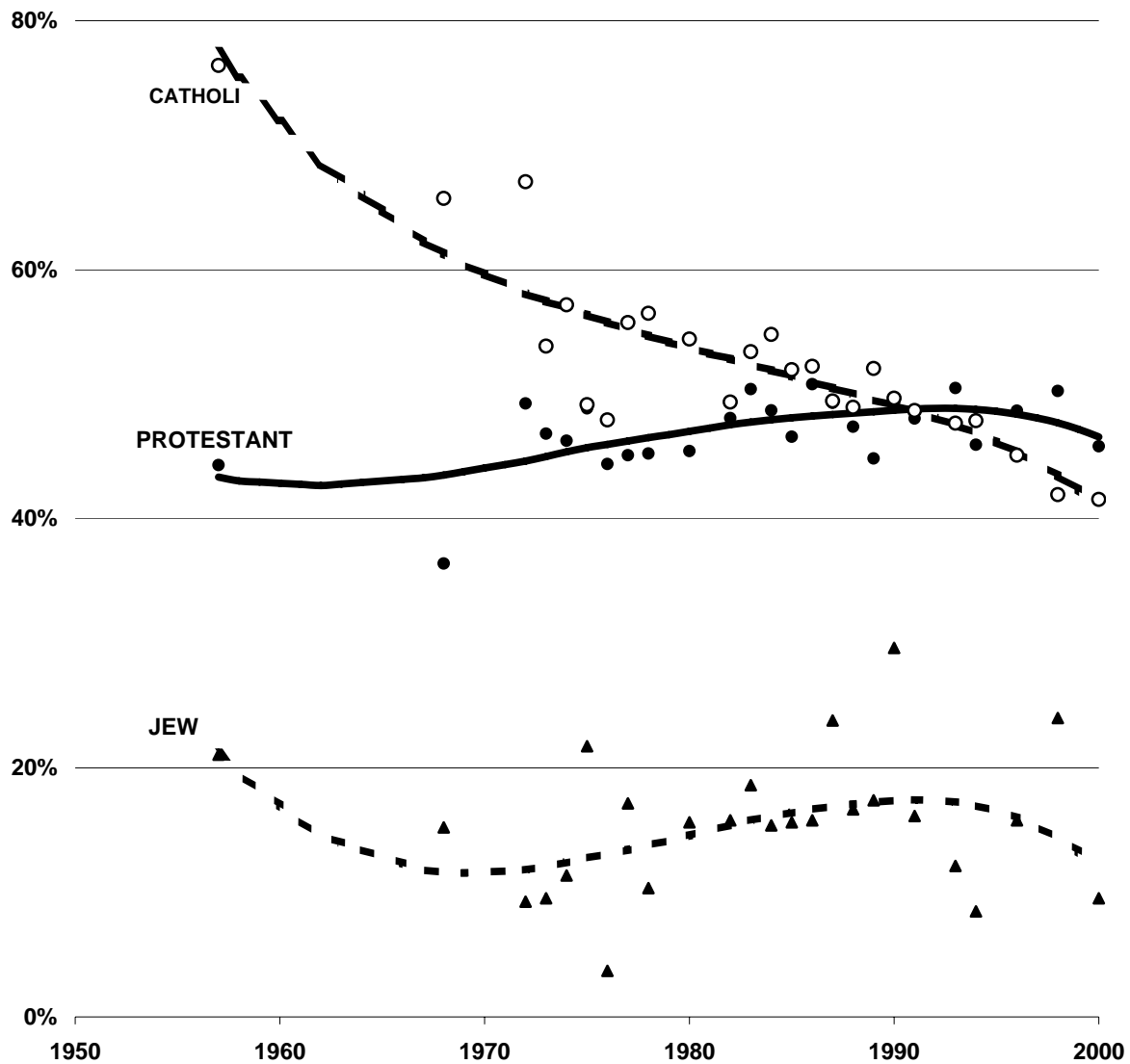


Figure 9. Percentage of American Adults Who Reported Attending Services the Prior Week by Religion and Year, 1957-2000

Sources: Gallup polls and General Social Survey.

Note: All points represent at least 20 cases; lines are cubic smoothers.

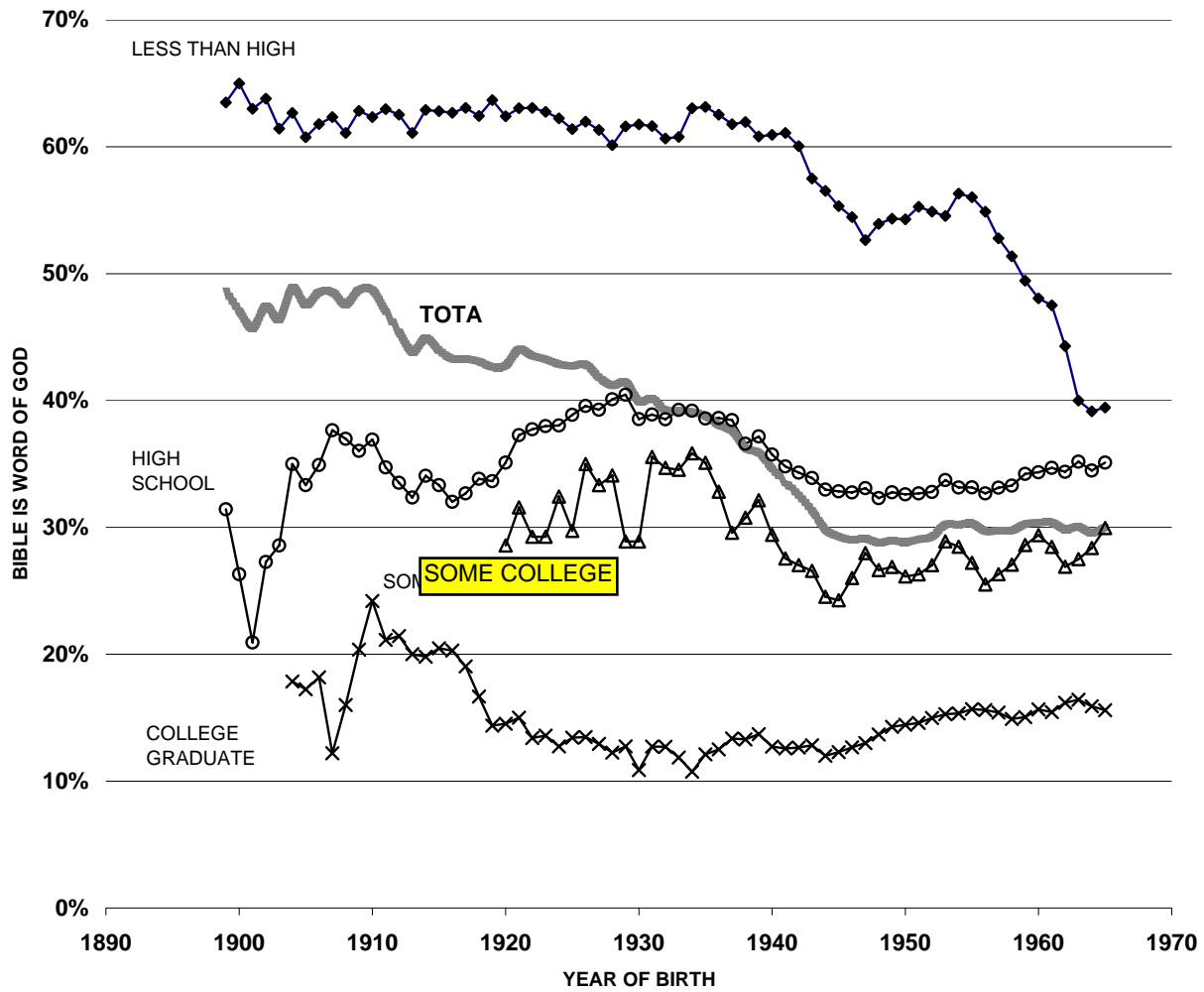


Figure 10. Percentage of American Adults Who Say the Bible is the Word of God, by Year of Birth and Level of Education

Source: General Social Survey.

Notes: Data restricted to persons 25 years old and over; data smoothed by 9-year moving average.

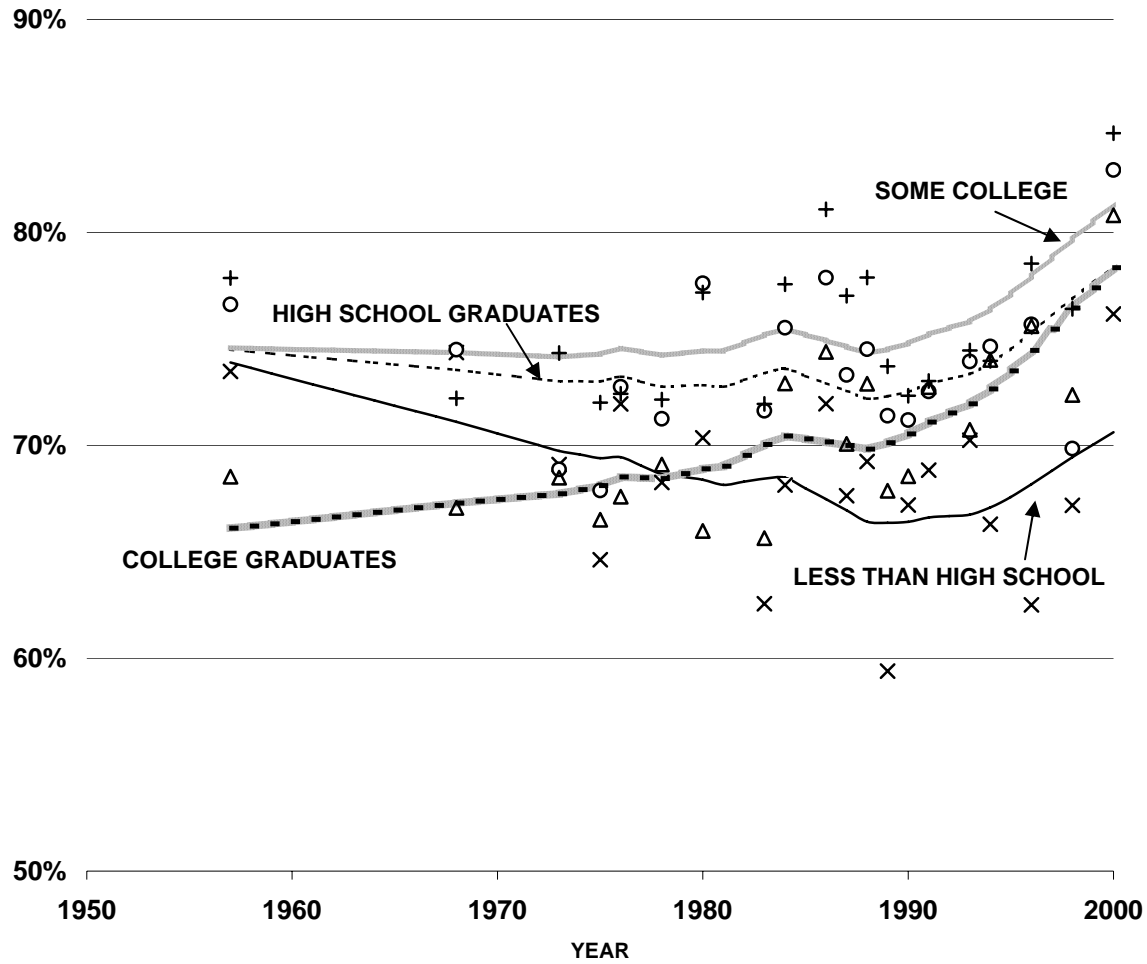


Figure 11. Percentage of American Adults (25 and older) Who Believe in Life After Death by Year and Education.  
 Sources: Gallup polls; General Social Survey.  
 Note: Symbols are observed points; lines are smoothers based on estimates from loess regressions.