

"A Century of Difference" Working Paper  
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## **RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN AMERICA, 1940-2000\***

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Paper prepared for submission to the Sociology of Religion Session  
Annual meeting of the ASA  
Chicago, IL  
August 2001

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## RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN AMERICA, 1940-2000\*

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### Abstract

We explore four components of American religious diversity in the twentieth century: (1) denominational diversity, (2) compositional diversity, (3) diversity of practice, and (4) tolerance. Denominational diversity declined as Protestant domination of the religious landscape gave way to, first, Judeo-Christian America, then, more recently, to a fuller array of religious affiliation (including 14 percent who now prefer no religion). Compositional diversity has actually decreased as the ethnic and class composition of groups has diversified. Data on practice (other than the frequency of it) is scarce, but the available evidence indicates that practice has become more standardized over time with the Christian form of a regularly scheduled service presided over by a professional clergy person who gives a speech is becoming widespread even in traditions that do not traditionally feature that form of religious practice. Finally, religious tolerance has substantially increased over time.

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## INTRODUCTION

The First Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed Americans freedom of religious choice. It is a freedom they enthusiastically grasped. Americans were then and still are seriously religious. Observers have long noted how much more devout Americans are than Europeans. British ambassador to America Lord Bryce wrote about a century ago 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 most other Western peoples to believe in God, practice religion, and consider religion important.<sup>1</sup>

Americans practice nearly every religion found in the world today. Americans also founded many Protestant movements which grew into major denominations, including the Unitarians, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists. Even before the era of the Constitution, the diversity of religious practice that flourished in the colonies attracted notice from European observers. The commingling of groups such as Quakers, Calvinists, Jews, Anglicans, 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, established church. Established churches were part of colonial and Federalist America, too. Most New England colonies established the Congregationalist church as their official religion while most Southern colonies established the Church of England. Some

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<sup>1</sup> 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."

carried establishment into the 19th century; the last state to disestablish religion was Massachusetts in 1833. Nonetheless, most American colonies had substantial religious pluralism in 1776. American religious diversity only increased over the decades that followed its formal recognition in the Constitution.<sup>2</sup>

The United States continually runs the risk of being divided by the ardent religiosity. Division occurred in the past when, for example, in the nineteenth century Catholic immigrants fought efforts at Protestant “Americanization” and Mormons were hounded out of the Midwest. Even today, when about half of Americans who profess a religion see themselves as “strong” adherents, when religious stances shape political positions on matters like abortion, when denominations depend on members’ commitments of energy, time, and money to survive (unlike the tax support given most European churches), and when churches compete for adherents in the religious “marketplace,” religion can be a source of division. It is undeniably a source of difference.

Yet when the nation has found itself in times of trouble, religion has provided common purpose. 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.

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<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, 1776-1990.

Our goals in this chapter are to catalogue American religious diversity, to document important changes, and to weigh the dividing and the uniting aspects of Americans' unusual degree of religious diversity and intensity. What we have found is that American religion grew even more diverse in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Somewhat to our surprise, however, the engine of change was demographic more than spiritual. The two waves of immigration to the United States in the first and last quarters of the century brought few people from Protestant countries and many millions of people from Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, and non-religious backgrounds. Immigration combined with differential fertility to reshape American religion; Protestants decreased from being almost 80 percent of the population 100 years ago to about 60 percent today. This dramatic shift in the nation's composition led to some serious conflicts, but two factors mitigated the effects of growing diversity. First was the internal differentiation of American Protestantism – the huge array of churches and factions within Protestantism made room for non-Protestant denominationalism, too. Second was a rapidly rising tolerance for (and maybe even preference for) religious differences. Americans embraced a live and let live ethos that was undoubtedly inspired by the First Amendment and just as surely not anticipated by the framers of it. This widespread tolerance and commitment to it facilitates religious coalitions on some issues and respect for fellow religious on all issues.

### **American 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. By the end of the century, Americans were far more aware that some people were outside that category – Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, members of new sects, and religious skeptics. What is the profile of American religion now, at the beginning of the third millennium after Christ?

To answer that question, it is useful to consider two dimensions of religion. One is the public, organized, infrastructure of denominations, churches, and codified theologies. People attend services and pay dues or contribute funds when they participate in organized religion. The other dimension is the private, individual beliefs and rituals people hold and practice. There may be major divergences between the two: In the 1990s, 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. Yet, about half of the people who said they had *no* religious preference nevertheless said that they believed in God.

We begin with the first feature of religion, its organization, looking specifically at the variety of religious identities Americans have. Figure 1 shows the most recent distribution of American adults among the major religious categories. Different surveys differ somewhat in some details (depending on technical issues like sampling and question wording), but the general pattern shown in the figure is reliable.<sup>3</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.

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<sup>3</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.

Other religious traditions – Eastern or Orthodox Christians, Islamic,<sup>4</sup> Buddhist, other Eastern – claim about one-half of one percent of Americans each. Almost two percent of Americans provided other sorts of replies, including “interdenominational,” “pagan,” and traditional faiths associated with Native Americans. Fourteen percent of Americans expressed a preference for no religion. We will look more closely at these Americans who claimed no religion later, when we see how their numbers increased during the 1990s. We can say briefly here that only a minority of these Americans were explicitly atheistic or agnostic in their beliefs; what generally typified them was a rejection of organized religion.

—FIGURE 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 (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) “is 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

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<sup>4</sup>Claims about the size of the Islamic population after the events of September 11, 2001 mostly indicated a larger share of the U.S. population (e.g., Gustav Niebuhr, “Studies Suggest Lower Count For Number of U.S. Muslims.” *New York Times*, 25 October 2001). However, all of the scientifically reliable tabulations of Muslim adults puts 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.

are not officially identified as members.”<sup>5</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>6</sup> Note that all persons in a denomination are categorized the same way; denominational membership not individual beliefs determine the category.

— FIG 2 —

The Southern Baptist Convention is the single largest specific denomination with 17 percent of Protestant adults. The combination of conservative Baptist organizations not affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention add up to the largest aggregation. Together conservative Baptists account for one-third of Protestants. Methodists of all types are next with about 14 percent of Protestant adults. Lutherans are about 10 percent of Protestant adults, but they are split with one-third of Lutherans in the conservative Missouri or Wisconsin synods while the rest (mostly in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) are doctrinal moderates.

Some highly visible denominations are smaller than less prominent ones. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) are just one percent of the GSS respondents.<sup>7</sup> The Jehovah’s Witnesses are only slightly bigger, and the Christian Scientists are smaller. Meanwhile, the largely invisible Holiness and Pentacostal churches are

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Holiness Partnership, [www.holiness.org/ourstory.htm](http://www.holiness.org/ourstory.htm) (Accessed – date –).

<sup>6</sup>Smith, “Classifying Protestant Denominations.” 1990.

<sup>7</sup>That fraction was higher in the 1980s when more primary sampling units were, by chance, in Utah.



three to four times more numerous as is the Church of God in Christ and similar denominations. Finally, an important marker of the dynamism of American Protestantism is the fate of the branches of Protestantism linked to the Pilgrims and Puritans who were so important in colonial times. These groups had organized themselves into Reformed and Congregational Churches by the end of the eighteenth century. In 1957 they joined to form the United Church of Christ. Here we combine them with the Unitarians (originally an offshoot of the Congregationalists) into one category. Altogether they make up about 2 percent of American adults.

### **Religious Participation**

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 attendance are. Most researchers acknowledge that some people exaggerate and that people who are religiously active are more likely to participate in 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>8</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>9</sup>

These numbers describe Americans' connections to organized religion in 2000. What about Americans' private beliefs and practices? Eighty-six percent of Americans said that they believed in God and another eight percent in a "universal spirit or higher power," while only five percent disbelieved both; 54% described themselves as religious and another 30% as "spiritual;" 79% said 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 that they prayed every day, and nearly all who prayed thought that their prayers were heard.

Given such high levels of religious feelings so intense as believing in Judgement Day, 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

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<sup>8</sup>Greeley, *Religion in Europe*, Transaction Press, 2001.

<sup>9</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, 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* 58:741-752, and the symposium on church attendance in the February 1998 issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

80% of those said such paths were equally good as their own.<sup>10</sup> This ecumenism and tolerance of religious diversity is an important feature of American piety.

### The Twentieth Century Rise of Religious Diversity

We will answer the question about the development of diversity among organized religions by drawing on two sorts of survey data about people's religious identities. One set tabulates the religious affiliations that representative samples of American adults reported to pollsters and survey researchers from about 1950 through 2000. The other set includes the answers that respondents to the General Social Surveys of 1972 through 2000 gave when asked about the religion in which they had been *raised*. The first allows us to describe changes over a half-century in adults' religious affiliations. The second allows us to extend our view back to about 1900. The latter also removes the effects of aging on religious affiliation by giving us a picture of how the religious membership of youths – at least as recalled later – changed over most of the twentieth century.

With this evidence, we tell the story of religion in three parts. First, we distinguish Americans who affiliate with the dominant, Western Judeo-Christian faiths from those who identify 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

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<sup>10</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>.

Protestants. From these examinations, we seek to answer the question of whether religious diversity expanded or contracted in the twentieth century.

*Western, Other, or No Religion.* Figure 3 summarizes the results of Gallup Polls, Roper surveys, and the General Social Survey from 1947 through 2000 (the early ones are exclusively Gallup).<sup>11</sup> 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 the fate of faith. Indeed, around 1970, the total hegemony of mainline Western faiths started to wane, dropping under 95% in 1972. Increasing proportions of Americans started reporting other religions or no religion. 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 estimate that between 12 and 14 percent of adults have no religion. Therefore the increase in "nones" – and thus the decrease in "western" – at the end of the century to be actually sharper than indicated by summary curves here.<sup>12</sup> (We look more closely at those professing no religion below.) In any case, religious diversity increased among American adults in the last third of the century.

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<sup>11</sup> The Gallup data were downloaded from their web site ([www.gallup.org](http://www.gallup.org)). 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.

<sup>12</sup> See Hout and Fischer, 2001. "Explaining the Increase ..." Working paper. <http://ucdata.berkeley.edu/rsfcensus>.

– FIG 3 --

We push our view further back in Figure 4. GSS respondents told interviewers the religion in which they were being raised. To be sure we are looking at American youngsters, we examined only respondents who reported that they were living in the United States while growing up (pegged at the time they were 16 for people who lived in more than one region of the United States or more than one country while growing up). (Using reported childhood religion to measure past religious diversity presents a few technical problems, but can still give us a general overview.<sup>13</sup>) The figure confirms our impression from the adult data: It is only at the end of the 1960s that Americans with non-western religions or no religion became numerically significant. "Others"<sup>14</sup> passed one percent only in early 1970s and the proportion of teens raised with no religion breached five percent only in the mid-1970s. The years before 1970 saw little net change in youngsters' religious identities, almost all being Judeo-Christian. Recent immigration has also added some variety. Before World War II, over 90 percent of those who reached age 16 overseas had been raised as Protestants, Catholics, or Jews, but only about two-thirds of those who reached 16 abroad after 1980 were "western" and the rest were overwhelmingly in an "other" religion.

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<sup>13</sup> The GSS question asks, "In what religion were you raised?" 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. The points in Figure 4 are seven-year moving averages centered on the year in which respondents were 16.

<sup>14</sup> "Others," sociologists have found, include respondents who do not choose the mainstream labels but are, in fact, Christians of some sort. See Darren Sherkat, 1999. "Dynamics and Composition of 'Other' Religions in the GSSs, 1973-1996." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*: 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).

– Fig 4 –

It would be a mistake to equate having no religion with having a secular world view because American adults who reported being raised with no religion (Figure 4) or currently having no religion (Figure 3) were largely distinguishable, not by their beliefs, but by their rejection of organized religion.<sup>15</sup> Most held a conventional cluster of religious beliefs. For example, about one-fifth of those who reported no religious preference in all the years of the GSS said that they had no doubts that God existed; another roughly one-fifth said that they believed in God although with occasional doubts; and another one-fourth believed in a “higher power.” In 1998, almost 60% of “nones” said that they believed “that God watches over me” and nearly 40% reported praying at least weekly. What most distinguished Americans with no religious preference from those who claimed a religion was an aversion to religious services and a disdain for organized religion. The rejection of formal religion, not loss of faith, also explains (along with demographic changes such as delayed marriage) most of the dramatic increase in having no religious that we witnessed in the 1990s. An additional factor also accounts for part of the 1990s upsurge: the increasing identification of churches with conservative politics, which led political moderates and liberals who had a weak religious attachment at the beginning of the decade to quit describing themselves with a religious label by 1998. Whether this will grow into the anti-clericalism familiar to Europeans remains to be seen.

The recent increases in the proportion of American adults professing no religion,

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<sup>15</sup> This discussion draws on Hout and Fischer, “Explaining the Rise in Americans with No Religious Preference: Generations and Politics” (<http://ucdata.berkeley.edu/rsfcensus>).

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.<sup>16</sup>

*Protestant, Catholic, and Jew.* In the last half of the century, American adults' affiliations shifted from Protestant to Catholic by about seven to eight points (and the proportion who were Jewish dropped by about half from 5 percent to around 2.5 percent); see Figure 5.<sup>17</sup> 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 as to be Protestants; among those who immigrated near the end of the century, the Catholic-reared outnumbered the Protestant-reared by better than five to one.<sup>18</sup> Immigration increasingly contributed Catholics (as well as "others," as we saw earlier) to America's religious diversity. Figure 6 shows at the religious affiliations of *native*

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<sup>16</sup>Fenggang Yang and Helen Rose Ebaugh, 2001. "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications." *American Sociological Review* 66: 269-288. Jay P. Dolan. 1992. *The American Catholic Experience from Colonial Times to the Present*. University of Notre Dame Press.

<sup>17</sup> The data-points 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-70s to 1992 (the last date for which religion was available in the Roper series).

<sup>18</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 who had been raised Catholic, but about 80% of those who reached 16 in the 1980s were raised Catholic.

youth over the whole century (smoothed by a seven-year moving average). It 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 5 show a weaker trend toward Catholicism than do the youth figures in Figure 6 because a growing proportion of Catholics converted to Protestantism in the later years of the century, this, in turn, largely produced by the Church's rejection of divorce.<sup>19</sup> By any measure, the numerical dominance of Protestants had declined by the end of the century.

– Fig 5 – AND – Fig 6 –

*The Restructuring of American Protestantism.* Focusing on the many Protestant denomination we can see that the drift toward more diversity also pertains within America's biggest religious grouping. Not only did Protestants form a declining share of the American population as the twentieth century wound down; the "mainline" denominations that once made up two-thirds of American Protestants were declining – most relatively but some absolutely, too. Figure 7 displays the 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>20</sup> The survey

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<sup>19</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 very latest-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 sort of population) 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: Divorced and Remarried Catholics in the United States." *America*, 16 December 2000, p.10ff.

<sup>20</sup>"Others" includes members of many small, often fundamentalist or evangelical, denominations and of independent churches and Protestants with no particular denominational attachment.



data on adults' current affiliations from 1960 on shows the same latter part of the trends in Figure 7: increases in the proportion Baptist and "other," declines in mainline denominations.<sup>21</sup> While the American Protestant population has generally shifted toward conservative denominations, it has also become more organizationally diverse. The growing "other" group, is composed of dozens of small denominations sects as we saw in Figure 2.

– Fig. 7 –

Demographic imperatives are at work in the conservative drift of the Protestant population, just as they are in the growth of Catholics and people with no religious preference. In fact, the shift over time from Protestants being split 60:40 in favor of the mainline denominations to 60:40 conservative is mostly due to the conservatives' higher fertility and earlier childbearing. A detailed analysis of the sources of change shows that 70 percent of the growth of the conservative denominations comes from their reproductive advantage; the 30 percent remainder (and more of the most recent change) stems from a declining propensity for people raised in a conservative home to convert to a mainline denomination in adulthood.<sup>22</sup>

*Conclusion.* In the late twentieth century, Americans have become more diverse in their organizational affiliations. This greater diversity includes not only a small but growing

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<sup>21</sup> These conclusions are drawn from adding the data in Smith, "Counting the Flock" to GSS surveys after 1989 (data not shown).

<sup>22</sup>Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde. 2001. "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change: The Case of American Protestants." *American Journal of Sociology* 107: xxx-yyy. Many authors, for example, James D. Hunter, 1987. *American Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (University of Chicago Press) and 1991, *The Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Basic Books) and Robert Wuthnow 1988. *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton University Press), attribute the growth of conservative Protestant denominations and sects to conversions of mainline Protestants to conservative ones. That kind of conversion has not changed significantly over the 75 years of available data, thus it can be playing *no* role in the changing distribution of American Protestants.

percentage of people adhering to faiths outside the Judeo-Christian core, but also more Americans who endorse a variety of stances toward religion, including being religious outside of organized institutions.

Although we do not go yet deeper here, within denominations, there is some evidence that churches within Protestant denominations have become more diverse as well, diverging in doctrine. For example, the conservative and mainline denominations alike have debated issues regarding the ordination of women and gay marriage. 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 Switching and Persistence**

The impressive stability of American religion and the demographic basis of the changes that are occurring stem from a strong tendency for adults to identify with the religion they were raised in. Almost 75 percent of adults currently prefer the religion of their youth.<sup>23</sup> Religious

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<sup>23</sup>This calculation excludes the 4 percent of adults who were raised with no religion.

scholars have lately come to refer to a “religious marketplace” in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Some Americans reported having “shopped around” for a church – half 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 8 allows us to examine religious stability and switching in detail. It shows the percentage of adults whose current religion is the same as the one they were raised in. The top row shows that Protestants’ tendency to prefer the religion of their youth differs by denominational type. People raised in a conservative denomination are less likely than other Protestants to change; 75 percent did not change their religion when they grew up. Moderates are next with about 70 percent unchanged, and liberals are the least with 63 percent unchanged. None of the three Protestant groups show any hint of a trend toward higher or lower religious stability.

- - Fig. 8 - -

The second row of Figure 8 shows the religious stability of people raised Catholic, Jewish, or with no religion. Catholics born in the first decade of the 20th century are the most stable group we observe – over 90 percent stayed Catholic. Stability decreased over the following five decades to merely average stability – 72 percent – for cohorts born since 1960. Jews may also have decreased their religious stability from over 85 percent to just about 65 percent over the course of the century. However, the small number of Jews in each cohort

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<sup>24</sup>For example, Fiske and Stark, *Churching of America*; Wade Clark Roof, 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace*. Princeton University Press.

results in some uncertainty about the statistical significance of this apparent trend.

The people raised without religion early in the century were very likely to acquire a religious preference in adulthood. Recently that tendency has reversed and people who were raised without religion have become stable in their non-affiliation. The rise is pretty spectacular – from roughly 30 percent of cohorts born before 1920 to 75 percent of the most recent cohorts.

The destinations of religious switchers show that most people who switch actually move to a similar denomination if they stay religious; we have already noted the growing tendency to prefer no religion.<sup>25</sup> Summarizing the results of research on religious mobility, we note that two-thirds of Protestant switchers chose another Protestant destination, 12 percent became Catholic, and 21 percent had no religious preference. Among Catholic switchers, half (53 percent) became Protestant, and one-third (37 percent) had no religious preference. One third of Jewish switchers became Christians, and the other two-thirds had 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 increased religious diversity because switchers were more likely to take no religion than they would have been assigned by chance and they were less likely to become Catholic than they would have with random assignment.

Personal stability across generations underscores the collective stability that we have depicted to this point. Religious diversity in the United States emerged as Catholic and Jewish

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<sup>25</sup>Darren Sherkkat, 1999. "Religious Switching" *Social Forces*.

immigrants brought their faiths with them from abroad. Since 1980 a new wave of immigration has further diversified the American religious landscape. But these processes of population renewal involve very little personal change or conversion.

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

As we noted earlier, Americans are generous about the value of other religions and the vast majority of religious Americans respect the civil liberties of religious skeptics. That tolerance clearly increased over the twentieth century, as witnessed by several pieces of research. In the 1920s, sociologists 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 the two most compelling changes in the religious life of Middletown were an increase in church membership and devotion on the one hand and a massive decline in the proportion who said that they believed that “Christianity is the one true religion and everyone should be converted to it” – from 94 to 41 percent.<sup>26</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 figure 7 shows, 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

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<sup>26</sup> Caplow, Bahr, and Chadwick, All Faithful People: Ch. 4; Caplow and Bahr, “Half a Century of Change in Adolescent Attitudes.”

they were also willing to vote for an atheist, up substantially.<sup>27</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.

-- FIG 8 --

The 1928, 1960, and 1976 presidential races can be thought of as practical tests of the avowed religious tolerance of Americans. In 1928 and 1960 the Democrats nominated a Catholic candidate for president, Al Smith in 1928 and John F. Kennedy in 1960; in 1976 the Democrats nominated a born-again Christian, Jimmy Carter, for president. The outcomes fit our argument that religious tolerance increased over the century; Smith lost but Kennedy and Carter won. In neither the 1928 nor the 1960 election could a Catholic win without receiving a large fraction of the Protestant vote. Likewise a born-again candidate could not have won in 1976 without support from other religious points of view. 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 of American elections have investigated each of these, especially the 1960 and 1976 elections.<sup>28</sup> Interviews with a large, representative sample of American voters in 1960 indicate that many voters 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

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<sup>27</sup> Voting data are from from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr990329.asp> (acc. 8-04-00).

<sup>28</sup>Our discussion draws from Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks. 2000. *Social Cleavages and Political Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 4.

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-Catholic voting prior to the 1880s.<sup>29</sup> The nativist, anti-immigrant, and “know-nothing” movements of the nineteenth century were expressly opposed to the urban political clout of Catholics and concern that Jews might soon exercise power too.<sup>30</sup>

Americans' religious tolerance is also extending to religious peoples' tolerance of the areligious or irreligious. Over the last half-century, a few polls have asked respondents whether someone could be a Christian without attending church. After the 1960s, a generational

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<sup>29</sup>Erie on Political Machines. Stanley Lieberman, 1980. *A Piece of the Pie*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>30</sup>Samuel P. Hays, 1964. *Response to Industrialism*. U Chicago Press.

change appears, younger cohorts being much more willing to say yes.<sup>31</sup> From its inception the GSS has asked about tolerance using a question format pioneered by Samuel A. Stouffer in the 1950s. People are asked 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 favor banning the speech fell from 35 percent in the early 1970s to 25 percent in 1996-2000, the percentage who think he should not be allowed to teach fell from 58 to 41 percent, and the percentage who would remove a book from the library fell from 38 to 29 percent.<sup>32</sup>

More intimate relations also show increased tolerance. Polls have occasionally asked whether respondents approve or disapprove of marriage across religious lines. These, too, show a generational difference that opens up in the 1960s, with more recently-born Americans being more tolerant than earlier birth cohorts.<sup>33</sup> This is backed up by behavior, as

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<sup>31</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.” The two items and years cannot be directly compared, but we can examine generational differences in each.

Can someone be a Christian without attending church?	<u>Born before 1900</u>	<u>1900-1919</u>	<u>1920-1939</u>	<u>1940-1959</u>	<u>Born after 1959</u>
1957 survey: “Yes”	79% (n=429)	77% (684)	79% (582)	—	---
1996 survey: “Agree + Strongly Agree”	—	65% (96)	59% (608)	71% (1233)	72% (1053)

In 1957, there were no generational differences; in 1996, there was a major break between the 1920-39 cohort and the 1940-59 cohort. The former, we note, were at least 21 when the 1960s began; the latter between 1 and 20, and were perhaps more influenced by the 1960s.

<sup>32</sup>This and subsequent calculations in this paragraph are our own.

<sup>33</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)



actual intermarriage has increased, between Jews and Gentiles, between Catholics and Protestants, and among Protestant denominations, with the possible exception of the most conservative denominations.<sup>34</sup> The next figure shows the trend, by birth cohort: the percentage of respondents in GSS surveys between 1973 and 1998 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>35</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.

— FIG 9 —

In sum, over the twentieth century – and especially during the “long 1960s” – Americans became much more accepting of religious diversity, even within their own

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Catholics and Protestants; (b) Jews and non-Jews?” Again, 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 change between the 1900-1919 and the 1920-1939 cohort, a change that continues into the following cohort. The largest gap comes a cohort earlier than we saw response to the church attendance opinion (previous note), but in both cases gaps emerge only after the start of 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>
PROT/CATH	1959	61.4% (n = 324)	62.1% (552)	63.0% (602)	—
	1968	—	57.8%* (649)	65.7% (632)	72.3% (235)
JEW/NON-JEW	1959	49.3% (324)	53.6% (577)	53.0% (625)	—
	1968	—	51.6%* (649)	63.4% (632)	68.5% (235)

\* Cell includes respondents born before 1900.

<sup>34</sup> Kalmijn, “Intermarriage and Homogamy,” esp. pp. 410-11.

<sup>35</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.

marriages.<sup>36</sup>

## Religious Practice and Belief

The conventional wisdom is that contemporary Americans are, a handful of fundamentalists aside, less religious than were 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, during the first 100 years after independence. 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>37</sup> Here, we focus on the latter part of the twentieth century and explore two general questions: One, in the midst of all these changes in the structure of Americans' religious affiliations, what has happened to their religious practice and belief? Two, as religious diversity increased, did Americans become more divided – or less divided – in their actual practices and beliefs?

*Belonging and Attending.* Figure 10 shows long-term trends in church membership and attendance as reported to the Gallup and Roper Polls. The top series shows the proportion

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<sup>36</sup> A striking case is that of Jews, who have traditionally severely shunned out-marriers. In a 2000 poll, half of Americans Jews agreed that "It is racist to oppose Jewish-gentile marriages" (cited in Rahel Musleah, "Jewish Jeopardy," *Reform Judaism*, Fall 2001: 18-22).

<sup>37</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, 1776-1990*.

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>38</sup> The findings should be taken with some reservations, because some respondents may exaggerate membership and attendance and (as we noted above) the kinds of people who are active religiously are also more likely to participate in polls and surveys. But the long-term trends, rather than the absolute numbers, are what interest us here. In that regard, the results for the earliest years should be taken with some special reservation, because polling methods were not as accurate then.<sup>39</sup>

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.

— Figure 10 —

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<sup>38</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>39</sup>On the debate over measuring attendance, see footnote 9 above. On cautions about early polls, see Glenn (1990).

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 members than was true later and that they attended services at rates similar to or below those of Americans in the latter half of the century.<sup>40</sup> These data reinforce the impression of that mid-century was the peak of a cycle of religious activity.

The stability in attendance, at least since the rates returned to pre-1950s levels in the 1960s, masks two strong countervailing trends. One is a sharp decline in attendance over *birth cohorts*. 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.<sup>41</sup> Over time, older frequent-attenders died out and were replaced by younger infrequent-attenders. That should have pushed net attendance rates down over the years. People attend more often as they age, marry, and parent and that effect roughly counterbalances the generational change.<sup>42</sup> As the average age of Americans has risen (from 23 in 1900 to 30 in 1980 and to 35 in

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<sup>40</sup> Here are some of the 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 1997: 307); a newspaper estimate in Providence reported in 1902 that 87% of Catholics and 69% of Protestants “claimed to attend church” (Sterne 2000); in 1930 only 20% of American Jews belonged to a synagogue; by 1960, 60% did (Shapiro 1992:159); a 1935 survey found that almost 80% of Jewish men had not attended services for a year (Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, p.93); community studies of rural towns c. 1940 reported low attendance rates (e.g., Moe and Taylor 1942: 61ff; MacLeish and Young 1942: 71ff); and see also estimates in Finke and Stark (19##). However partial these numbers are, they do not match the impressions of universal religiosity many people hold for the early twentieth century.

<sup>41</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 nearly every week, every week, or more than once a week were coded as having attended.

<sup>42</sup> 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.

2000), religiosity has increased alongside, yielding the basically flat trend line since the 1960s. Another part of the trend has been a slightly increasing diversity since 1972 among Americans in their rates of attendance. As more Americans spurned weekly services, many still remain loyal, creating a wider spread in this kind of religious, organizational involvement.<sup>43</sup>

Differences among American adults in attendance are not random, of course, and attendance norms vary according to peoples' religious denomination, region of residence, racial ancestry, parenthood, age, and gender. More importantly for our purposes, the historical trend over the last quarter of the twentieth century differed for the first four factors. By pooling a couple of Gallup polls with the 1972-2000 General Social Surveys, we can track the proportion of survey respondents aged 25 to 74 who said they had attended church in the week prior to the interview.<sup>44</sup> Figure 11 shows that the time trend differed greatly by religious affiliation. The most precipitous change was among Catholics; as late as 1972, over 60 percent reported attending weekly, but by the end of the century, only about 33 percent did. The declines in attendance among Protestants, Jews, and "others" were not statistically significant. Catholics similarly experienced a precipitous *generational* drop in attendance.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Unfortunately, we cannot calculate the 80/20 ratios that are so informative when studying diversity because the data are collected in gross categories. As a fall-back, we used the GSS question on how often respondents attended services, assigning a score to each reply that corresponds to the proportion of people who gave that answer who also said that they attended a church service in the last seven days. We assigned a score of 0 to those who said "never," .005 to those who said "less than once a year," and so on, through 1 for those who said "more than once a week." Between 1972 and 2000, the mean score for 25-to-74-year-olds dropped from .49 to .37, indicating that the probability of the average person turning up at a church service this week fell by .12. But the coefficient of variation grew from .85 to 1.10 – indicating more diversity in church attendance in 2000 than in 1972. More of the increase was in the "never" category than in the "more than once a week" category – raising the skewness of the distribution from .05 in 1972 to .58 in 2000.

<sup>44</sup>We look only at 25-to-74-year-olds because those under 25 and those over 74 are not representative of their cohorts due to college enrollments and incarceration for the younger and the combination of differential mortality and institutionalization for the older people.

<sup>45</sup> About 75% of Catholic respondents, 25 to 74 years old, born before 1900 reported weekly attendance, but under 25% of those born after 1960 did.

The decline in attendance among Catholics is consistent with studies showing that about one-third of Catholics who had been attending weekly through the years of the Vatican Council 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>46</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 religious groups over the years (and over generations) in rates of attendance.

– Figure 11 –

Protestant denominations emphasize attending services to differing degrees. Recent debates about the vitality of evangelical Protestantism in particular, has made the variation in attendance from denomination-to-denomination a point of great interest.<sup>47</sup> While Protestants who identified with conservative denominations were more likely than liberal ones to attend services in any given week in the last half of the twentieth century, there is no statistically reliable quantitative evidence of greater or lesser change in one denomination than another. Methodist churches might not be as full as they used to be and the Pentecostal and Baptists churches are presumably fuller. But that is not because Methodists are decreasing their attendance while Pentecostals and Baptists increase theirs. It is because there are fewer

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<sup>46</sup>Michael Hout and Andrew Greeley, 1987. "The Center Doesn't Hold." *American Sociological Review* 52: 325-345.

<sup>47</sup>Christian Smith, 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Also Mark Chaves, 1998. "Review of American Evangelicalism." *Christian Century*.

Methodists and more Pentecostals and Baptists.

The only noteworthy exception to the overall flat attendance trendlines for Protestants was a regional convergence: Attendance among Southern Protestants dropped toward the level of Protestants in other regions (offsetting the boost that might have come from the rise in the proportion of Protestants living in the South between 1950 and 2000).

Because peoples' patterns of church membership and attendance are set relatively early in life, we can learn more about the past by comparing people born in different years instead of comparing people interviewed in different years. Our analysis of a century of birth cohorts, reveals *convergence* in Protestants' attendance patterns across a variety of traits. We used multivariate statistical analyses to assess statistical significance.<sup>48</sup> In addition to the time trend toward convergence between the South and the rest of the country, we found that differences by racial ancestry, gender, and region were smaller in recent cohorts than they had been for cohorts born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. African Americans reported attending church more often than whites in the earlier generations, but recent cohorts showed no difference by ancestry. Women of earlier cohorts attended more often than did men, but the gender gap was much smaller in more recent generations. Regional differences – Southerners high and Westerners low – were much smaller for the recently-born than those born earlier.

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<sup>48</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.

One exception to the converging trends concerns the difference between parents and the childless (those who never had children and empty-nesters). In earlier cohorts parents and non-parents did not differ, but in the later cohorts, adults with children in their homes were attending at a relatively high rate and those without children were not attending. Having a child in the household is, of course, strongly linked to stage in the lifecycle. Nevertheless, the pattern holds within age groups.

Earlier, we noted that for the total population, skew increased as attendance fell from 1972 through 2000. Denominational and regional subcultures are not behind the growing skew. The groups with the most distinct patterns of church attendance in the early 1970s – Catholics, Southerners, and African Americans – decreased their average level of church attendance and, thereby converged on the average typical of other segments of American society. Within Protestantism, denominational differences are stable. The only *groups* moving apart are parents and non-parents.

Attendance at religious services was one of the staples of American culture throughout the twentieth century. Sociologist Mark Chaves aptly calls the church “America’s principal site of culture creation.” The changes we have reviewed here are variations on a high level of involvement. The main source of change in religious change during the last one-third of the twentieth 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 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>49</sup>

We concur with that reading of the evidence. 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 by 1975), but their sense that other groups were unchanged and unchanging is borne out here. Some researchers, most notably Robert Putnam, have looked at data very similar to those we have presented and reached more a extreme conclusion. In Putnam's words churches are "hollowed out;" "decay has consumed the load-bearing beams of our civic infrastructure."<sup>50</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 data points that are tainted by technical problems – the most obvious being a total lack of respondents who expressed a preference for no religion. Of course, we have shown the 1950s to be exceptional in several respects. It is a decade to be analyzed, to be sure, but hardly a benchmark for "normal" America. With all that in mind, then, we conclude that the only noteworthy trend in religious participation over the last half-century or more has been the convergence between Catholic attendance and that of mainline Protestants.

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<sup>49</sup>"The Center Doesn't Hold," p. 341.

<sup>50</sup>*Bowling Alone*, p. 72.

*Prayer.* The proportion of American who prayed at least daily stayed between 50% and 60% from 1983 through 2000.<sup>51</sup> We have only a 17-year window and in that period it is not easy to see group differences in trends. But Catholics did tend to drop from a higher frequency of praying to a level nearer that of Protestants, a convergence. College graduates prayed at higher rates by 2000 than in 1983, becoming more likely to pray daily than those of less education, a divergence.<sup>52</sup>

*Believing.* The most basic religious belief, of course, is belief in God. In the last half of the twentieth century, over 90% of Americans have 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>53</sup> Part of the reason is the replacement of earlier-born believers by later-born nonbelievers, but there was also a modest drop within generations between the 1950s and 1990s. But all these changes in believing in God are within a very narrow range, the 90%-plus range.

We can explore more variation in belief by using a question that the GSS asked people from 1988 to 2000. Interviewers asked respondents to choose one of six options, which

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<sup>51</sup>Based on our calculations from the GSS between 1983 (when the question was first asked) and 2000. But generations differed. Eighty percent of respondents born around 1900 said they prayed at least daily, but only about 42% of those born around 1970 reported that difference. It is difficult to determine whether this results from later generations of Americans being less devotional or from the fact that young people are less devotional than older people; the second seems likelier. Age and year of birth correlate at  $-.945$  across the GSS samples. Regression analyses suggest that a linear effect of age, rather than of birth year, is important. But, even with age controlled, there is a significant *non-linear* effect of birth year, which suggests a decline in daily prayer until roughly the 1960 birth cohort and then an increase.

<sup>52</sup> These comments are based on a regression analysis of the dichotomy, prays daily versus not, on year, age, several control variables, and interaction terms for Catholic and college-educated.

<sup>53</sup> The decline from the 1960s on was true only for whites.

ranged 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, the percentage answering “no doubts” never varied from 65% by more than two points. (By generation, certainty in God declined – notably among Catholics – until the baby boomer generation born between 1945 and 1959 and then stabilized.) There appeared to be a slight increase over time in certainty about God among the highly-educated.<sup>54</sup> This item is much better than the simple “yes or no” approach in the Gallup polls, but its greater sophistication has not turned up any recent change. This question lacks the pedigree of the “yes or no” question, but we have two earlier time points: 1964 and 1981.<sup>55</sup> NORC included initiated the GSS question about types of belief about God in an omnibus survey in 1964. That survey, 24 years before the 1988 GSS found that 77 percent of Americans believed in God without doubt – compared with the average of 65 percent for the 1988-2000 GSSs. Most of the difference between the 1964 and 1988 responses involve doubt, not a different type of belief. That is 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 the do not believe in God went up from 1 to 5 percent).<sup>56</sup> Here we have one more piece of evidence that a significant segment of American society changed their outlook on God as well as religion in the 1960s. Unfortunately we have

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<sup>54</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>55</sup>From George Bishop, 1999. “Americans’ Belief in God.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63: 421-434.

<sup>56</sup>The 1981 percentage of 63 percent is on the low side of the GSS percentages.

no points from the late 1960s or the 1970s to see more precisely when the change occurred or whether it was sudden or gradual.

A higher threshold of doctrinal belief concerns the *literalness of the Bible*. After the 1960s, Americans were much less likely to say the Bible was literally true than they did before the '60s, from about 65% in 1963 being literalists to about 35% in 1973.<sup>57</sup> After that shift, there was little change. The GSS asked interviewees from 1984 through 2000 whether they thought the Bible was the literal word of God, inspired by God, or a book of fables.<sup>58</sup> Over those 14 years, slightly fewer Americans, from 37% to 33%, answered "Word of God;" the proportion saying fables increased from 14.5% to 17%. Group differences narrowed modestly.<sup>59</sup> Cohort patterns capture the longer-term changes. Belief in literalism declined steadily from cohort to cohort until the baby-boomers; then, the trend leveled off. Americans born in the 1970s were as literalist as those born in the late 1940s.<sup>60</sup> Closer inspection shows that the generational differences were largely due to two factors: One, increasing education in the population and, two, a decline in literalness among those who failed to complete high school. (See Figure 12.) Over the century, the least-educated converged with other Americans'

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<sup>57</sup> See e.g., Smith, "Religious Beliefs;" Sherkat and Ellison, "Recent Development and Current Controversies in the Sociology of Religion."

<sup>58</sup> "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."

<sup>59</sup> Racial, regional, community, and educational differences declined, as blacks, southerners, rural residents, and the least educated moved away from literalness and as the college-educated slightly increased their literalism.

<sup>60</sup> These analyses, recall, include only 25-to-74-year-olds. About 45% of those born in the 1910s were literalists, about 28% of those born in the 1940s were; and about 28% of those born in the early 1970s.

formulations on the Bible.<sup>61</sup>

– Figure 12 –

Pollsters and researchers have often asked a more general religious or spiritual question: whether the respondent believes in *life after death*. In the last half of the twentieth century, Americans grew slightly *more likely* to say that they believed in life after death. In 1957, 74 percent said yes and 26 percent said no; in 2000, 82 percent said yes and 18 percent said no. Different types of Americans largely *converged* toward belief. Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Americans who professed no religion shifted toward the level of conviction held by fundamentalist Protestants. For example, circa 1970, fewer than 20 percent of Jews and fewer than 50 percent of respondents who claimed no religion expressed belief in an afterlife; at the end of the century, about 60 percent of both did. 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 13. About 75 percent high school dropouts believed in life after death both circa 1960 and circa 2000; Americans of higher educational attainments, however, especially college graduates, noticeably increased their levels of belief. It is almost as if the least educated had missed out on a new social wave, belief in the afterlife.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</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 1910 and the 1940 cohort. The interaction effect of year of birth X not graduating high school accounts for 6 more points.

<sup>62</sup> Respondents with some college are not shown in Figure 13 for easier reading. Their line roughly parallels that of high school graduates, a couple of points higher. Generational patterns were similar to the period patterns, but the latter were more robust. These interactions 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

— Figure 13 —

*Conclusion.* We have examined here five indicators of religious involvement, in addition to a quick look at church membership: weekly attendance at services, daily prayer, 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: membership, attendance, and prayer may have dropped a bit around the 1960s, but were level afterwards. Certainty about God's existence, about the literal truth of the Bible, and life after death did not change dramatically in the last decades of the century, either.

These constants in Americans' religiosity cover occasional sharp changes over the generations. Americans born around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were much more religiously active and religiously certain than those born in the 1960s and 1970s (except when considering belief in life after death). Comparing across years for people of a similar age, however, there was remarkable stability in religious belief and practice. Catholics changed far more than Protestants or Jews did, and the changes among Catholics account for most of the overall trends. Furthermore, Catholic change in attendance, prayer, and certainty was almost certainly connected to internal changes in Catholicism, not to a diffusion of ideas or practices typical of Protestants.

This brings us to the question of diversity. Generally, we found more instances of *convergence* than *divergence* – increasing homogeneity across Americans with different

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Catholics is negative, becoming *less* believing than Protestants. Note: these data dichotomize believers versus non-believers and exclude don't knows.

religious identities (in attendance and believe in the afterlife), with different educational attainments (in most items), and occasionally of different races, genders, and types of residence. One major exception, increasing dissimilarity, concerns the least educated. High-school dropouts at the end of the century, were more literalist than dropouts in mid-century, while the opposite was true of other Americans. Also, late-century dropouts were as likely to believe in life after death as were mid-century dropouts, while for higher educational groups, belief increased.

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 already assimilated people and new arrivals.<sup>63</sup> For Jews Americanization entailed adopting Protestant organizational structures (for example, congregational democracy), service practices (e.g., forms of congregational singing), and even beliefs (for example, redemption through good deeds). The founders of Reform Judaism in the late nineteenth-century explicitly wanted to assimilate. They 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.

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

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<sup>63</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* (Yale University Press, 1985).

Catholic newspapers and magazines, radio and television programs, and book publishers.<sup>64</sup> The separatist policies were dramatically reversed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). 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 struggled 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>65</sup> but remarriage following divorce is the single largest risk of exit for contemporary Catholics.<sup>66</sup>

A century later, leaders of Asian immigrant communities are similarly adapting Bhuddism and Confucianism. Even as America's religious structure is becoming more differentiated, its religious culture may be becoming more homogenous as the model of regularly scheduled religious services presided over by a member of a professional clergy who gives a formal lecture on matters of religious interest, leads collective prayer spreads ever more widely.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>See Charles Morris, 1997. *American Catholic* (Times Books) and Mark S. Massa, 1999. *Catholics and American Culture* (Crossroad).

<sup>65</sup>Melissa J. Wilde, 2000. "Marketing Divorce Through Annulments." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

<sup>66</sup>Michael Hout, 2000. "Angry and Alienated: Divorced and Remarried Catholics in the U.S." *America*, 16 December 2000, p. 10ff.

<sup>67</sup>See Yang and Ebaugh (2001) and Chaves (1999).



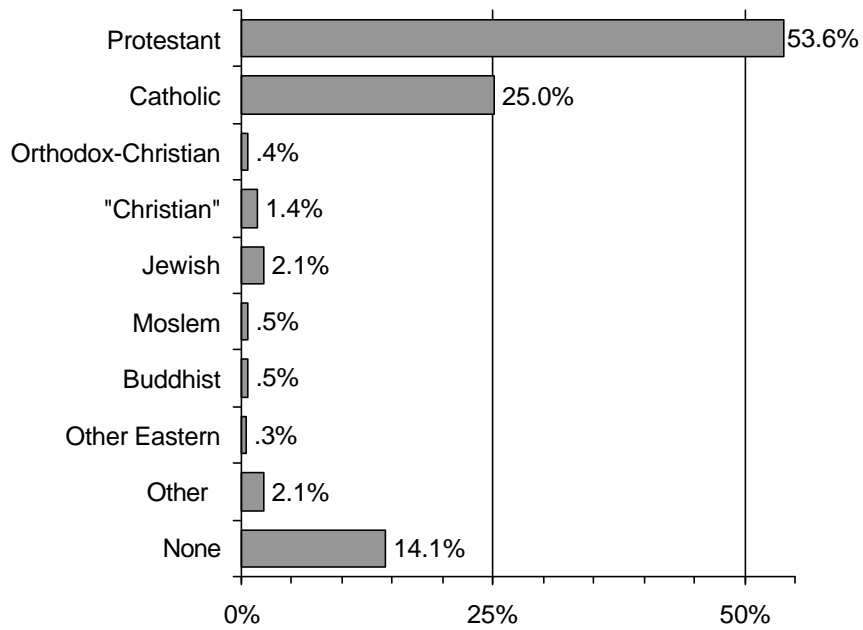


Figure 1. Percentage of American Adults with Each Religious Preference: 25-74-year olds, 1998-2000  
Source: General Social Survey

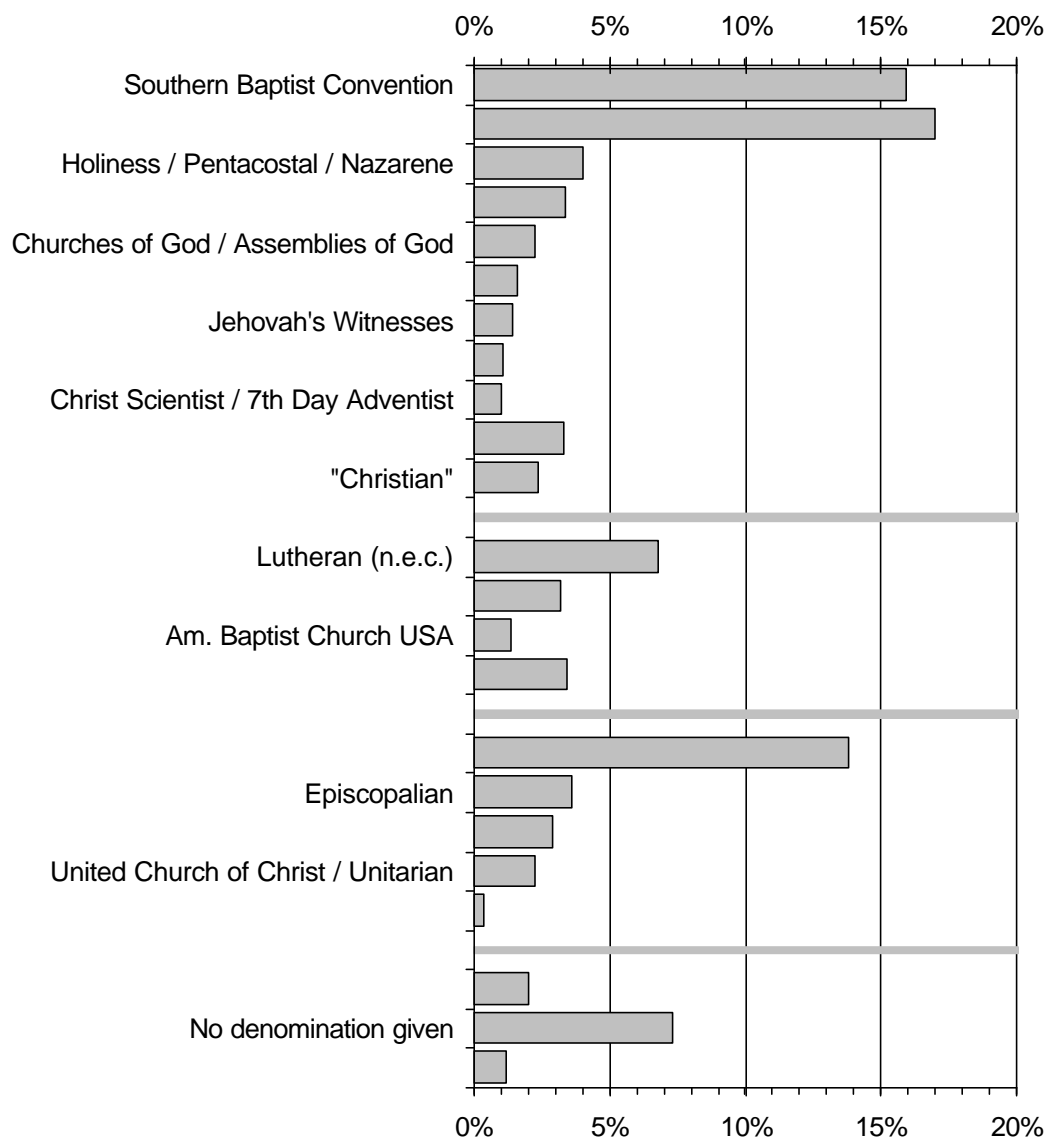


Figure 2. Percentage of Protestant Adults with Each Denominational Preference: 25-74-year olds, 1998-2000  
 Source: General Social Survey

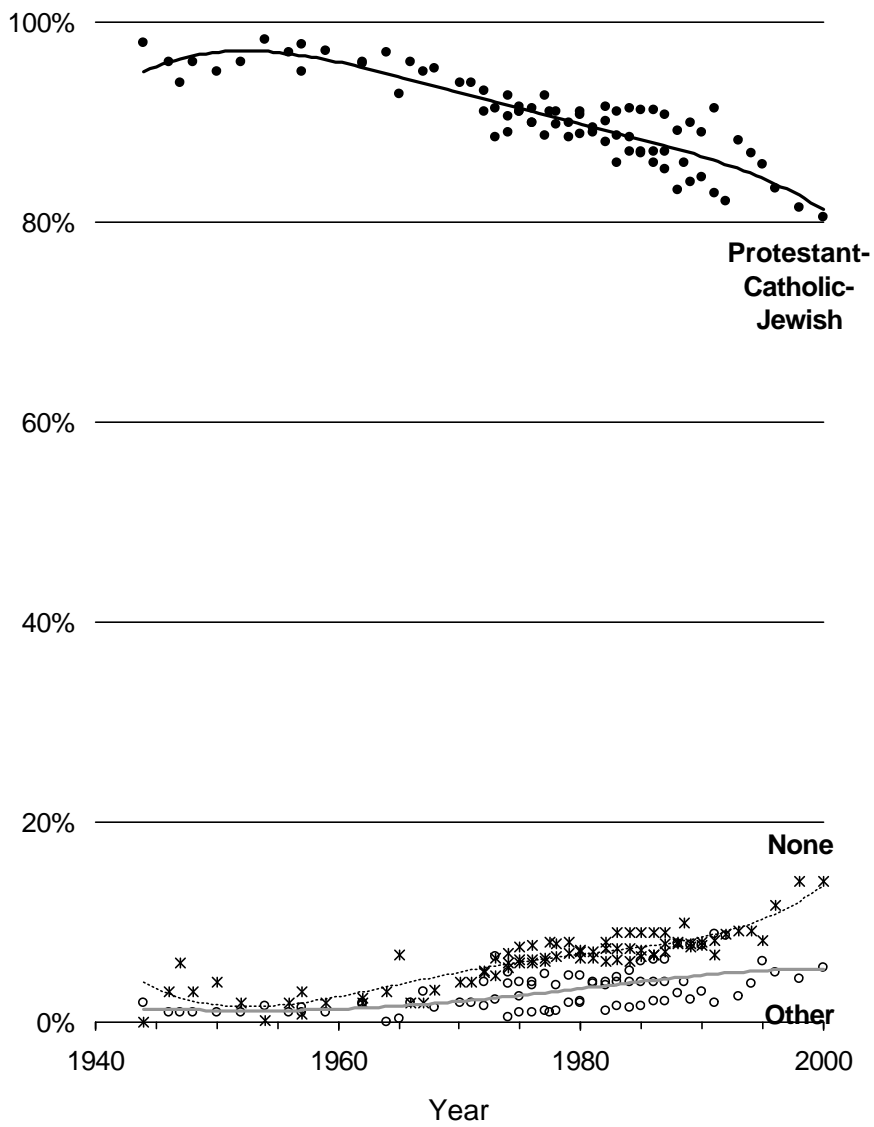


Figure 3. Percentage of American Adults with Each Religious Preference, Main Categories, 1944-2000  
 Sources: Gallup, Roper, NORC, and General Social Surveys.

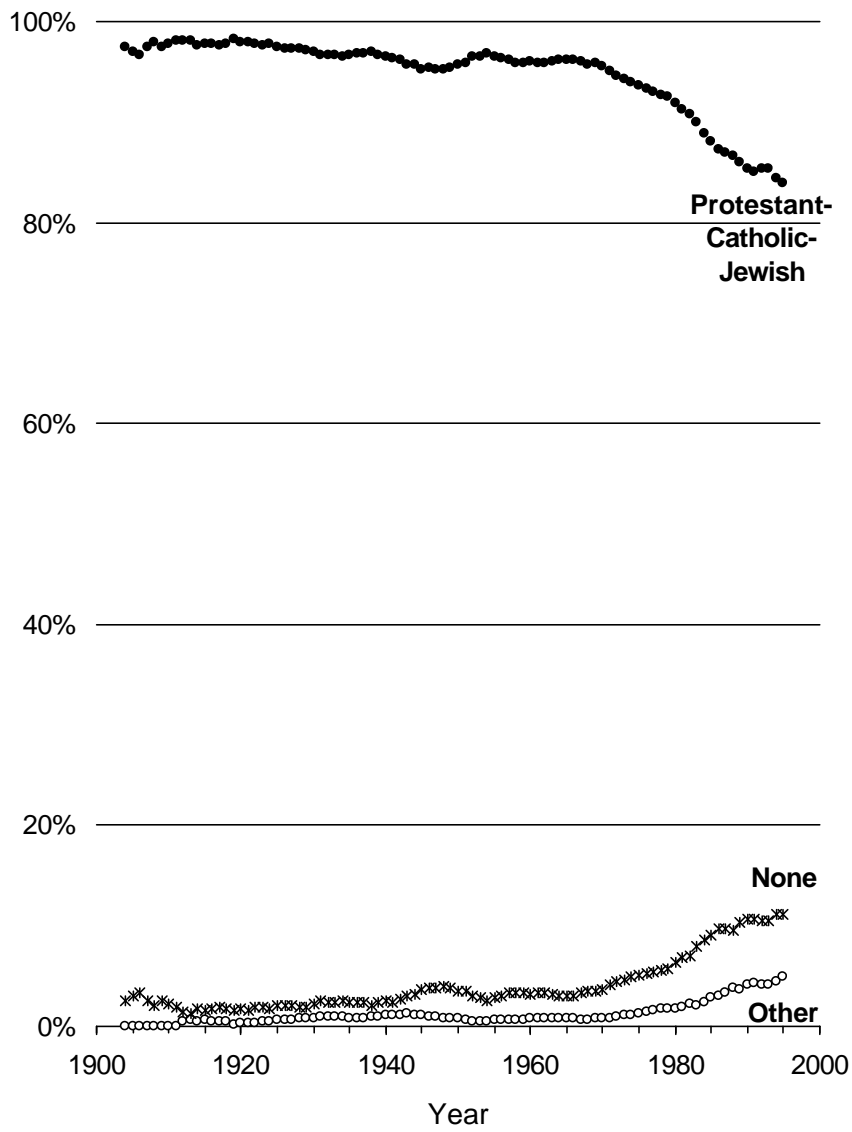


Figure 4. Percentage of American Adults by Their Religious Upbringings as Youths, by the Year They Turned 16 Years Old  
 Source: General Social Survey, 1998-2000.

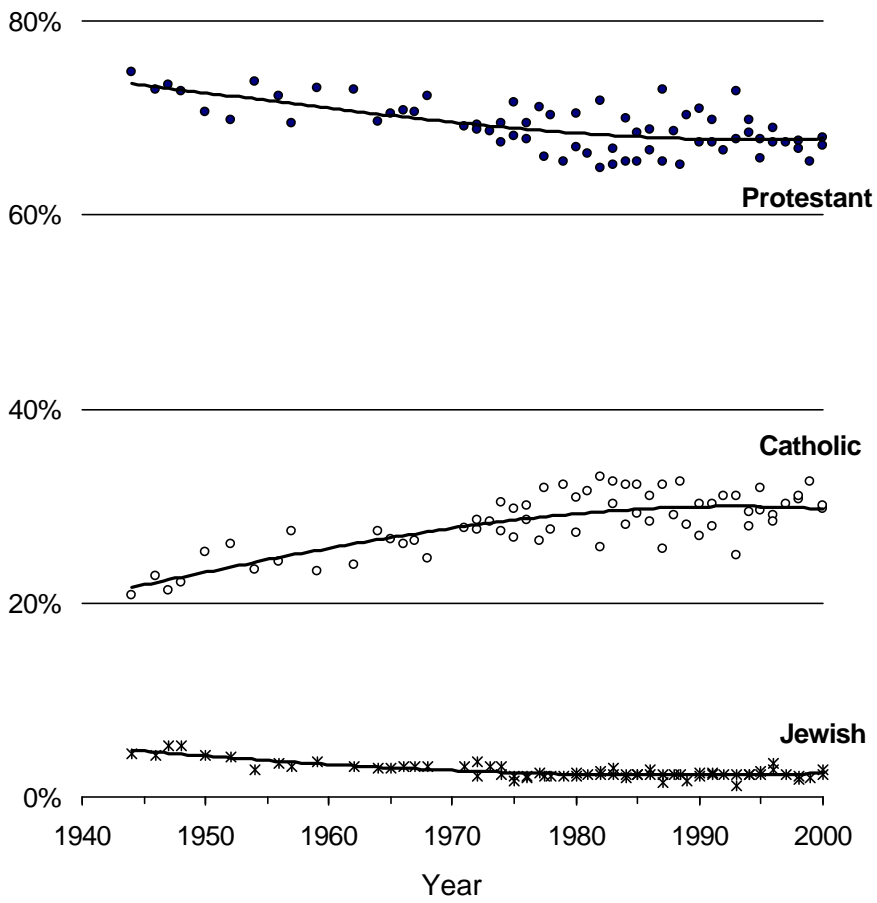


Figure 5. Percentage of American Adults by Major Western Religion and Year, 1944-2000  
 Sources: Gallup, NORC, and General Social Survey.

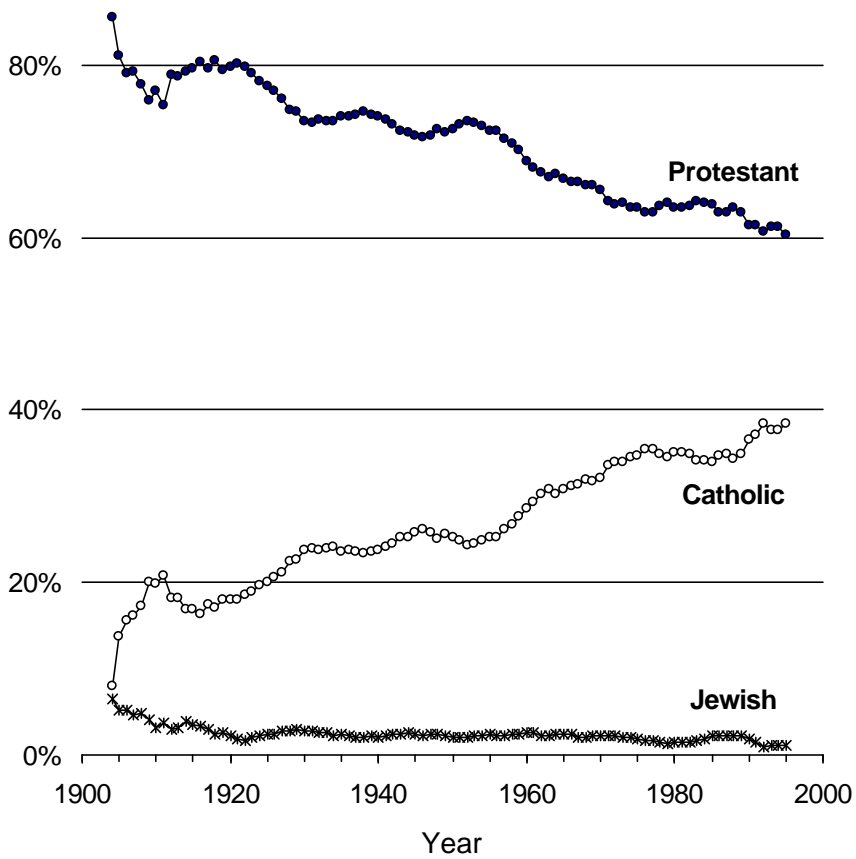


Figure 5. Percentage of American Adults by Major Western Religion and Year, 1944-2000  
 Sources: Gallup, NORC, and General Social Survey.

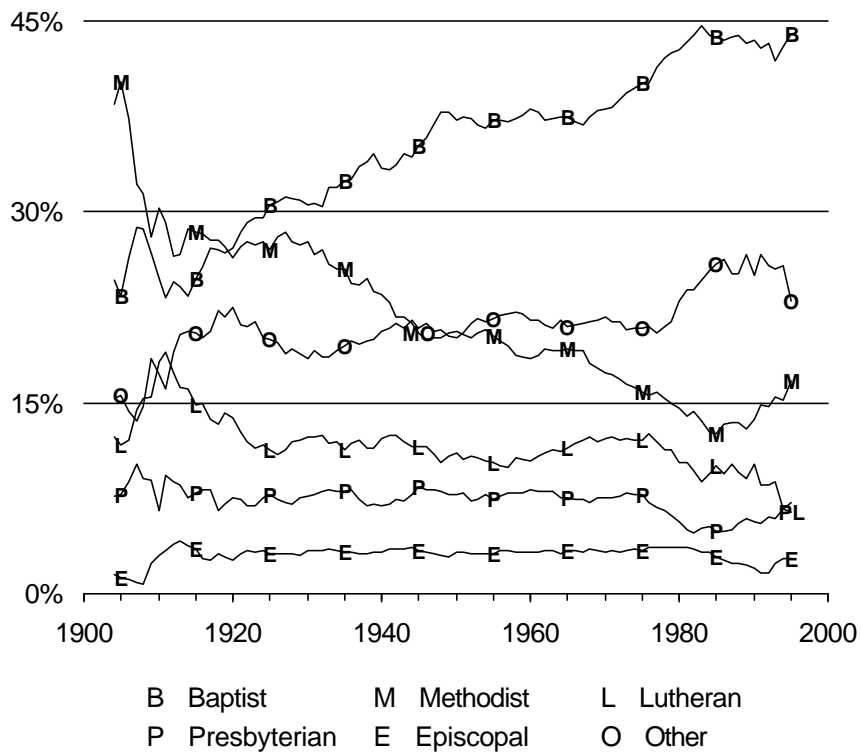


Figure 7. Denominational Distribution of Adults Raised Protestant by Year They Turned 16 Years Old  
 Source: General Social Survey, 1998-2000.  
 Note: Data smoothed by 7-year moving average.

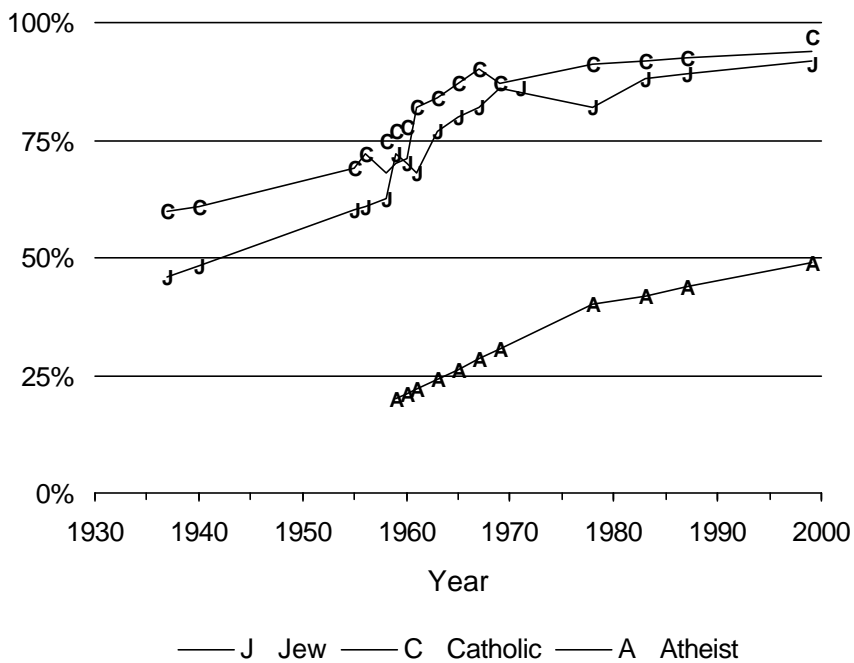


Figure 8. Percentage of American Adults Who Said They Would Vote for a "Well-qualified" Jew / Catholic/ Atheist for President by Year, 1937-2000  
 Source: Gallup polls.



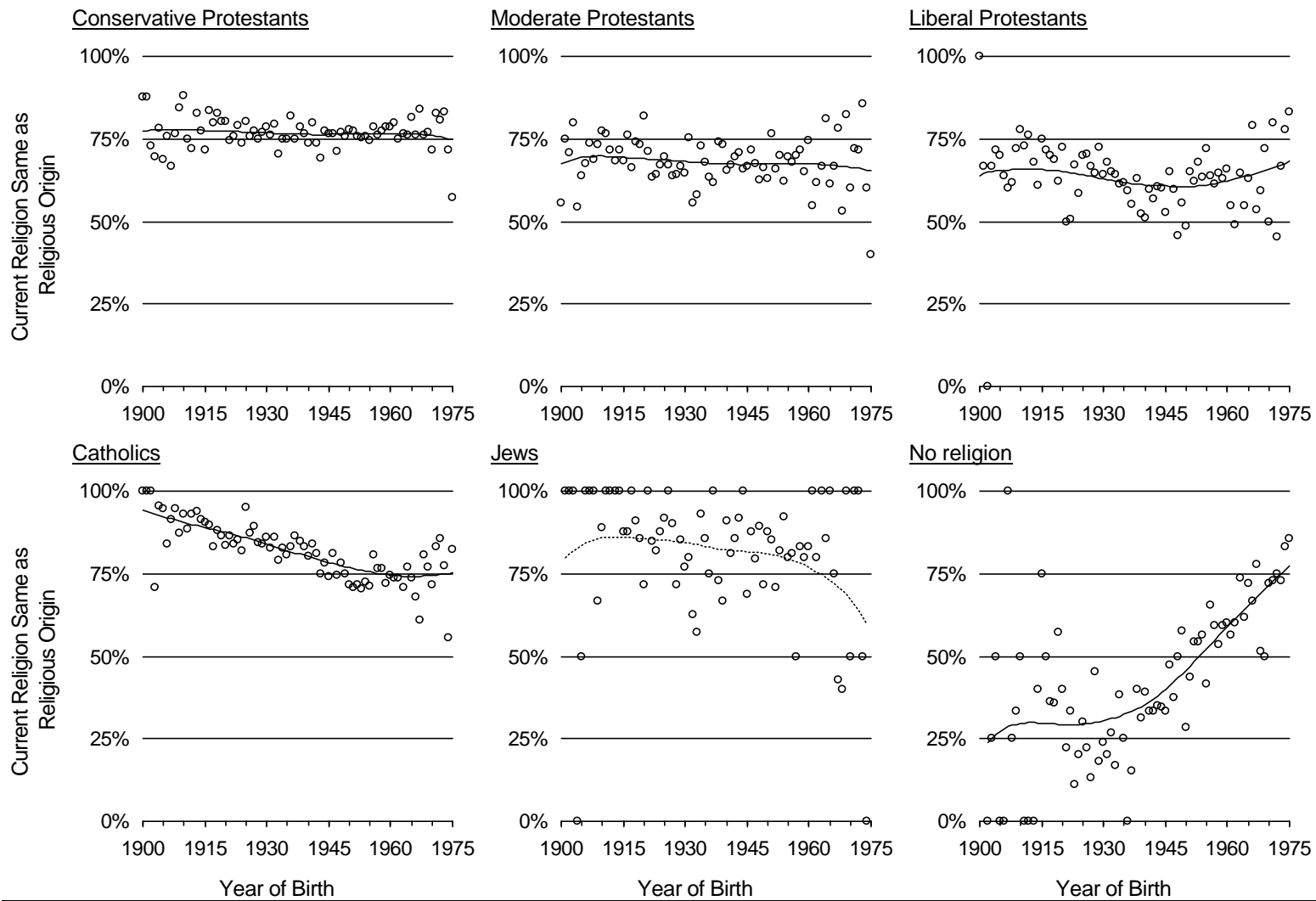


Figure 8.

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).

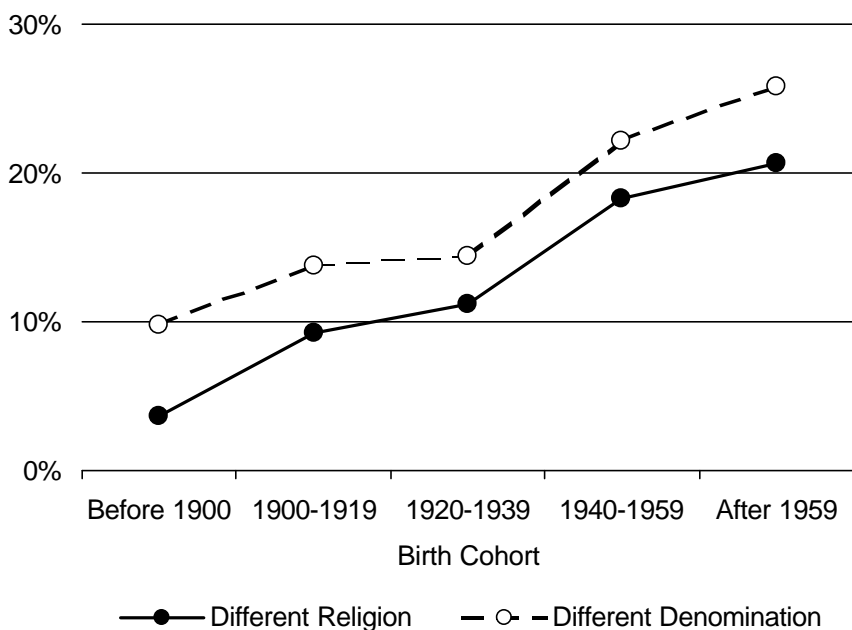


Figure 9. Percentage of Married Couples with Different Religions (Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish) or Different Denomination for Protestants  
 Source: General Social Survey, 1974-1994.

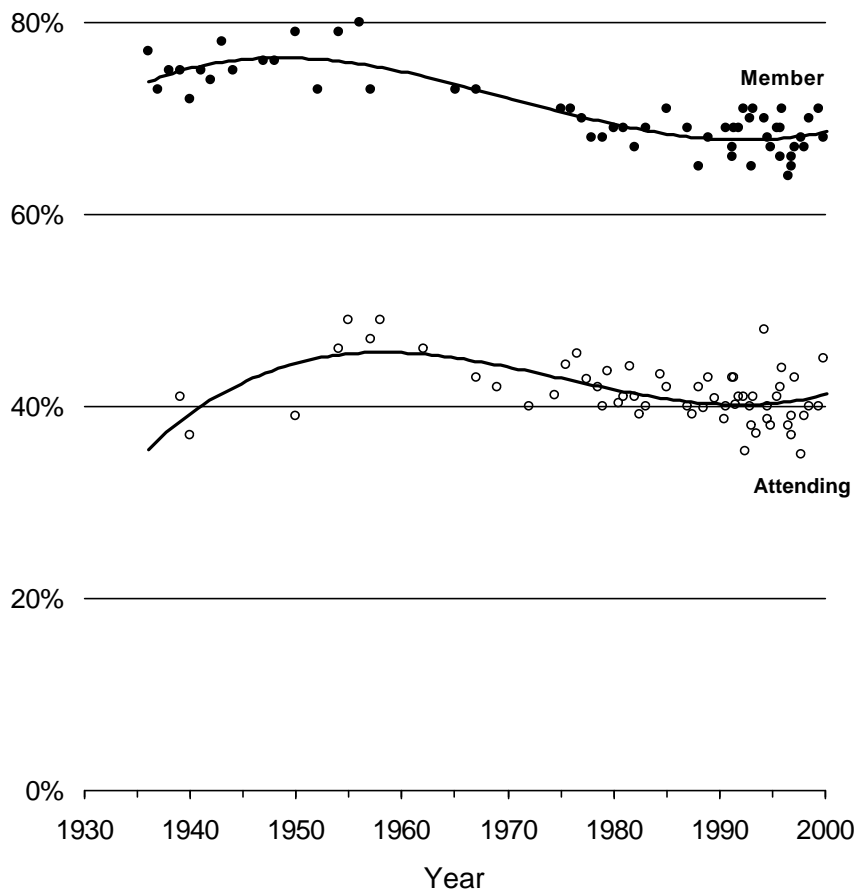


Figure 10. Percentage of Americans Reporting That They Were Members of a Church and Percentage Reporting Attendance at Church in Prior Week by Year, 1937-2000  
 Sources: Membership (Gallup polls); Attendance (Gallup and Roper).

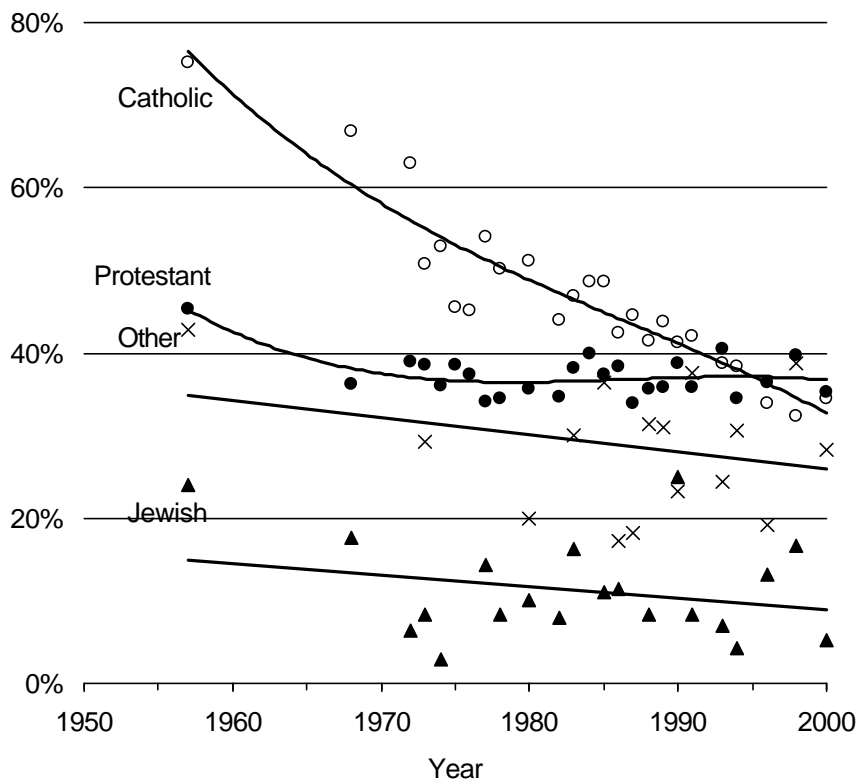


Figure 11. Percentage of American Adults Who Reported Attending Services the Prior Week by Religion and Year, 1957-2000

Sources: Gallup polls and General Social Survey.

Note: All points represent at least 20 cases.

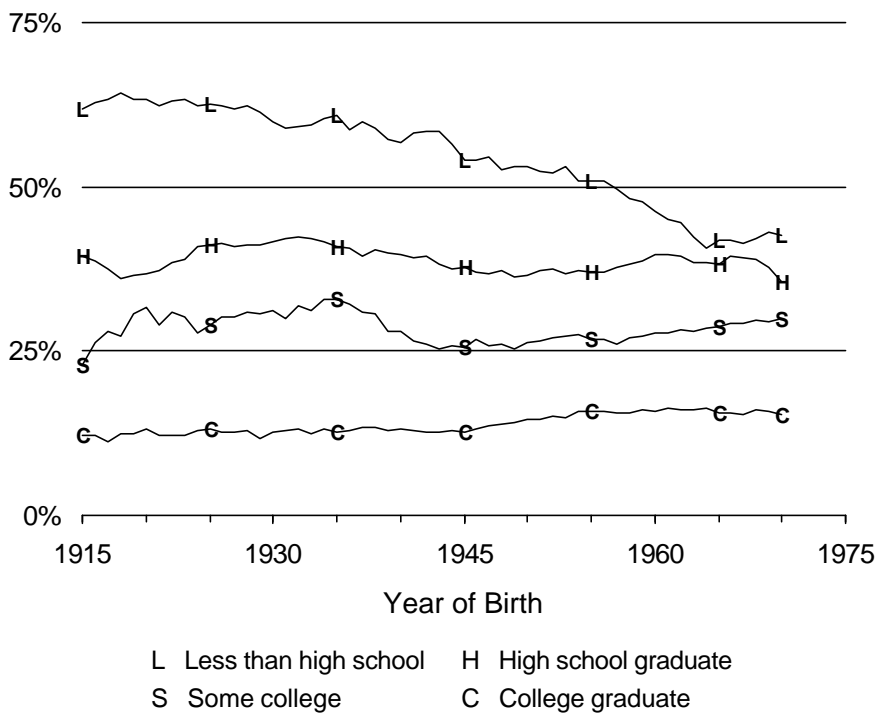


Figure 12. Percentage of American Adults Who Say the Bible is the Word of God, by Year of Birth and Level of Education  
 Source: General Social Survey.  
 Notes: Data restricted to persons 25-74 years old; data smoothed by 11-year moving average.

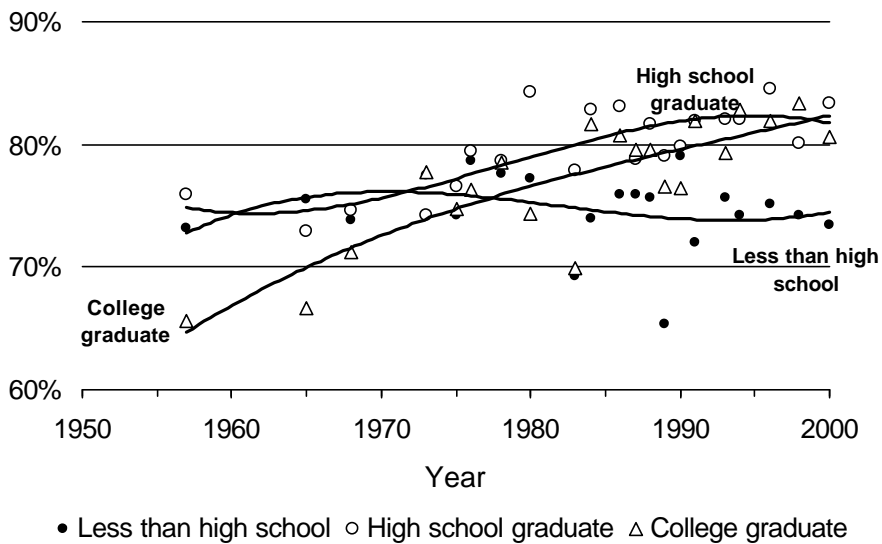


Figure 13. Percentage of American Adults Who Believe in Life After Death by Year and Education: Persons 25-74 Years Old  
 Sources: Gallup polls; General Social Survey.  
 Notes: Data for persons with some college education excluded to improve the legibility of the figure; data smoothed by third-order polynomials.