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Faith as Fashion Statement — The New Religious Reality?

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Looking at data from a massive survey taken in 1990, Barry Kosmin argued that many Americans saw religious beliefs as “a personal hobby.” Now, with fresh data in hand, he asserts that contemporary Americans increasingly see religious faith as “more like a fashion statement, not a deep personal commitment.”

Barry Kosmin is director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. His study, known as the American Religious Identification Study [ARIS], is one of the largest and most significant surveys of the American religious scene ever conducted. The bottom line? “The American population still self-identifies as predominantly Christian but Americans are slowly becoming less Christian.”

By any measure, the study reveals an increasing secularization of the society. The percentage of Americans identifying as unaffiliated with any religious group or denomination has risen sharply (from 8% in 1990 to 15% in 2008). In fact, the unaffiliated now outnumber all but Catholics and Baptists.

One significant trend detailed in the report is a weakening of all denominational ties. The study points to a generalized loss of clear convictions and Christian self-identification. As Kosmin and his colleagues conclude, “The challenge to Christianity in the U.S. does not come from other religions but rather from a rejection of all forms of organized religion.”

Back in 1990, fully 86% of Americans identified themselves as Christians. Now, only 76% do — a loss of ten percentage points in less than two decades. Interestingly, Kosmin’s mid-term research indicates that the greatest loss of such identification took place in the 1990s, rather than since 2000.

The study paints an interesting and sometimes surprising picture of American religious life. Catholic populations are shifting from the Northeast and Midwest to the Sun Belt. Mainline Protestant denominations continue to lose members. As the report states, “The historic Mainline Christian Churches have consistently lost market share since the 1950s, but since 2001 there has been a significant fall in numbers.” This is particularly true of Methodists and Episcopalians.

Baptists did experience growth, which according to the researchers indicates “a measurable reassertion of a Baptist identity among the population.” Nevertheless, Baptist growth did not keep up with the growth of the population.

For the last several decades, America has experienced a growing divide between Christian and secular citizens. This pattern has emerged as a factor in politics, cultural controversies, education, and demographics. Now, these researchers argue that the numbers of Americans represented by those who identify as “Born Again” Christians (34%) and those who reject the existence of any personal God (25-30%) are now almost even — a major new reality in our times. As the report states, “These questions on belief reveal the cultural polarization between the pious and non-religious portions of the population, which are now roughly similar in size.”

As noted already, the growth of the “nones” is most significant:



The most significant influence on American religious geography over time has been the increase in the Nones, or No Religion bloc. As noted earlier, nationally the Nones more than doubled in numbers from 1990 to 2008 and almost doubled their share of the adult population, from 8% in 1990 to 15% in 2008. Moreover, the Nones increased in numbers and proportion in every state, Census Division and Region of the country from 1990 to 2008. No other religious bloc has kept such a pace in every state.

This analysis is basically in line with what other studies, including the Pew Forum's "[U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#)," have detected.

Cathy Lynn Grossman of [USA TODAY](#) accurately summarized the report and its findings:

When it comes to religion, the USA is now land of the freelancers. The percentage of people who call themselves in some way Christian has dropped more than 11% in a generation. The faithful have scattered out of their traditional bases: The Bible Belt is less Baptist. The Rust Belt is less Catholic. And everywhere, more people are exploring spiritual frontiers — or falling off the faith map completely.

On the one hand, this new data and analysis paints a daunting portrait of our nation as an increasingly secular mission field. Resistance to all forms of organized religion and increasing secularity mean that many of our neighbors are growing increasingly distant from contact with Christianity and the Gospel of Christ.

On the other hand, this also represents a challenging and promising new day in terms of evangelism within the United States. The fact that millions of Americans no longer identify themselves as Christians of any description means that these millions *know* that they are not Christians — as distinct from millions of other Americans who think they are Christians simply by family identification or other superficial consideration.

Evangelism takes on a new urgency in an age marked by people who see faith as little more than a “fashion statement.”

In any event, the ARIS report draws our attention to one great and undeniable fact — we are living in the midst of a vast mission field for the Gospel. Of course, we should have known that all along.

