New Pew Research Center Study Examines America’s Changing Religious Landscape

Survey of 35,000 Americans Finds Christians Have Declined Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Have Continued to Grow

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Washington, May 12, 2015 — The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing, according to an extensive new survey by the Pew Research Center. Moreover, these changes are taking place across the religious landscape, affecting all regions of the country and many demographic groups. While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages. The same trends are seen among whites, blacks and Latinos; among both college graduates and adults with only a high school education; and among women as well as men.

The United States remains home to more Christians than any other country, and a large majority of Americans — roughly seven-in-ten — continue to identify with some branch of the Christian faith. But the major new survey of more than 35,000 Americans finds that the percentage of adults who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in an equally massive Pew Research survey in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated — describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” — has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%. And the share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths also has inched up, rising 1.2 percentage points, from 4.7% in 2007 to 5.9% in 2014. Growth has been especially great among Muslims and Hindus, albeit from a very low base.

The drop in the Christian share of the population has been driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics. Each of those groups has shrunk by approximately three percentage points since 2007. The evangelical Protestant share of the U.S. population also has dipped, but at a slower rate, falling by about one percentage point since 2007.

These are among the key findings of the Pew Research Center’s second U.S. Religious Landscape Study, a follow-up to its first comprehensive study of religion in America, conducted in 2007.

Because the U.S. census does not ask Americans about their religion, there are no official government statistics on the religious composition of the U.S. public. Some Christian denominations and other religious bodies keep their own rolls, but they use widely differing criteria for membership, and sometimes do not remove members who have fallen away. Surveys of the general public frequently include a few questions about religious affiliation, but they typically do not interview enough people, or ask sufficiently detailed questions, to be able to describe the country’s full religious landscape. The Religious Landscape Studies were designed to fill the gap.
Among other findings in the new study:

- **Christians probably have lost ground not only in their relative share of the U.S. population but also in absolute numbers.** In 2007, there were 227 million adults in the United States, and a little more than 78% of them — or roughly 178 million — identified as Christians. Between 2007 and 2014, the overall size of the U.S. adult population grew by about 18 million people, to nearly 245 million. But the share of adults who identify as Christians fell to just under 71%, or approximately 173 million Americans, a net decline of about 5 million.

- **American Christians – like the U.S. population as a whole – are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse.** Non-Hispanic whites now account for smaller shares of evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants and Catholics than they did seven years earlier, while Hispanics have grown as a share of all three religious groups. Racial and ethnic minorities now make up 41% of Catholics (up from 35% in 2007), 24% of evangelical Protestants (up from 19%) and 14% of mainline Protestants (up from 9%).

- **Religious intermarriage appears to be on the rise.** Among Americans who have gotten married since 2010, nearly four-in-ten (39%) report that they are in religiously mixed marriages, compared with 19% among those who got married before 1960.

- **While many U.S. religious groups are aging, the unaffiliated are comparatively young – and getting younger, on average, over time.** As a rising cohort of highly unaffiliated Millennials reaches adulthood, the median age of unaffiliated adults has dropped to 36, down from 38 in 2007 and far lower than the general (adult) population’s median age of 46. By contrast, the median age of mainline Protestant adults in the new survey is 52 (up from 50 in 2007), and the median age of Catholic adults is 49 (up from 45 seven years earlier).

- **Switching religion is a common occurrence in the United States.** If all Protestants were treated as a single religious group, then fully 34% of American adults currently have a religious identity different from the one in which they were raised. This is up six points since 2007, when 28% of adults identified with a religion different from their childhood faith. If switching among the three Protestant traditions (e.g., from mainline Protestantism to evangelicalism, or from evangelicalism to a historically black Protestant denomination) is added to the total, then the share of Americans who currently have a different religion than they did in childhood rises to 42%.

- **Christianity – and especially Catholicism – has been losing more adherents through religious switching than it has been gaining.** More than 85% of American adults were raised Christian, but nearly a quarter of those who were raised Christian no longer identify with Christianity. Former Christians represent 19.2% of U.S. adults overall. Both the mainline and historically black Protestant traditions have lost more members than they have gained through religious switching, but within Christianity the greatest net losses, by far, have been experienced by Catholics. Nearly one-third of American adults (31.7%) say they were raised Catholic. Among that group, fully 41% no longer identify with Catholicism. This means that just 2% of U.S. adults have converted to Catholicism from another religious tradition. No other religious group in the survey has such a lopsided ratio of losses to gains.

- **The evangelical Protestant tradition is the only major Christian group in the survey that has gained more members than it has lost through religious switching.** Roughly 10% of U.S. adults now identify with evangelical Protestantism after having been raised in another tradition, which more than offsets the roughly 8% of adults who were raised as evangelicals but left for another religious tradition or who no longer identify with any organized faith.

- **The Christian share of the population is declining and the religiously unaffiliated share is growing in all four major geographic regions of the country.** Religious “nones” now constitute 16% of the adult population in the South (up from 13% in 2007), 22% of the population in the Midwest (up from 16%), 25% of the population in the Northeast (up from 16%)
and 28% of the population in the West (up from 21%). In the West, the religiously unaffiliated are more numerous than Catholics (23%), evangelicals (22%) and every other religious group.

- **Whites continue to be more likely than both blacks and Hispanics to identify as religiously unaffiliated.** Among whites, 24% say they have no religion, compared with 20% of Hispanics and 18% of blacks. But the religiously unaffiliated have grown (and Christians have declined) as a share of the population within all three of these racial and ethnic groups.

This is the first report on findings from the 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, the centerpiece of which is a nationally representative telephone survey of 35,071 adults interviewed on both cellphones and landlines from June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Findings based on the full sample have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 0.6 percentage points.

The results of the 2014 Religious Landscape Study will be published in a series of reports over the coming year. This first report focuses on the changing religious composition of the U.S. and describes the demographic characteristics of U.S. religious groups, including their median age, racial and ethnic makeup, nativity data, education and income levels, gender ratios, family composition (including religious intermarriage rates) and geographic distribution. It also summarizes patterns in religious switching. In addition, this report includes an appendix that compares the findings of the 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Studies with several other surveys and assesses how recent developments in American religion fit into longer-term trends.

The full first report is available on the website of the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life project. In addition to the written reports, the Religious Landscape Study's findings will be available at . This interactive tool allows users to delve more deeply into the survey's findings, build interactive maps or charts and explore the data most interesting to them.

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