



American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us

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Summary Points: Changes in American Religiosity & Tolerance (Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 15)

Chapter 3 & 4: Religiosity in America

Lifecycle, Generational, and Period Effect Change

- Most people's religious views and habits are formed fairly early in life. All of us tend to evolve in fairly predictable ways as we age, following what social scientists call **life cycle patterns**. These patterns produce a kind of life cycle escalator toward greater religiosity as an individual ages.
- However, people born and raised in different eras get onto that escalator at different levels. People raised in a less religious era may never become as observant as people raised in a more observant time... Such a difference between people born and raised in different eras is termed by social scientists a **generational effect**.
- Both generational and life cycle patterns involve change, but in pure form they produce very different patterns of change. In pure life cycle patterns, individuals change, but society does not change. Conversely in pure generational change, individuals do not change, but society does change, as different generations enter and leave the population. Social change embodied in generational change is slow and gradual, because at any given time the population includes people from many different generations.
- If people of all ages experience simultaneous change in a particular period—what social scientists term a "**period effect**"—then like a school of fish the whole society can change direction very quickly, and can also reverse course just as quickly.
- If only the youngest cohort in society changes (and then persists in that new direction throughout their own life cycle), society as whole changes inexorably but almost imperceptibly, like a massive supertanker changing course.
- Over time, therefore, generational change is especially important, mandating special attention to differences among successive cohorts of young people. Society-wide measures of religious behavior muffle portentous change that may be occurring at the young edge of the population, so social prognosticators focus on trends among young adults, trying to discern which aspects

of behavior are what they are because the youth are young, and which aspects are what they are because of when they are young.

- All three sorts of change—life cycle, generational, and period—can occur simultaneously, and thus we are likely to misperceive the slow but inexorable effects of generational change.
- If the differences between one generation and the next are small, then generationally based social change will be real (and significant) but very slow. If for some reason a younger generation deviates substantially from its predecessors, then the aggregate social change may be quick—significant over a few decades.

Religious Attendance: Generational Change

- Americans who came of age in the 21st century are much more likely than Americans who came of age in the 20th century to report lower church attendance than was true of their families when they were growing up, a pattern that confirms our conclusion that generational replacement is producing a slow but steady decline in religious observance.
- To sum up, independent streams of evidence suggest that Americans have become somewhat less observant religious over the last half century, mostly because of slight but cumulative declines from generation to generation, especially with the coming of age of the boomers in the 1960s and of the millennials at the end of the century.

Fast, Uneven, Perceptible Change—A Shock and Two Aftershocks

- While change and adaptability have long been the hallmark of American religion, over the last half century the direction and pace of change have shifted and accelerated in three seismic phases. Since the 1950s one major shock and two major aftershocks have shaken and cleaved the American religious landscape, successively thrusting a large portion of one generation of Americans in a secular direction, then in reaction thrusting a different group of the population in a conservative religious direction, and finally in counterreaction to that first aftershock, sending yet another generation of Americans in a more secular direction. Just as an earthquake and its aftershocks can leave a deep fissure in physical terrain, so too this religious quake and its pair of aftershocks have left a deep rift in the political and religious topography of America.
- **Major Shock: The 1960s:** a temblor of social, sexual, and political turmoil coinciding with the alienation of a large part of the Baby Boom from conventional religion and conventional morality.
 - Massive generational change in the Baby Boomer cohort: social, sexual (premarital sex), and political.
 - Religious institutions suffered a dramatic loss of confidence and self-confidence
 - Religious certainty begins to erode and religious relativism increases
 - Decline in religious observance nationally, but especially generationally - among the young where the decline was twice the national average

- **Aftershock #1: The Rise of Evangelicals and Conservative Churches, and the Religious Right (1970s-80s):** a reaction to the moral and spiritual decay of the 1960s, especially the change in sexual morality and, in particular, premarital sex; and the rise in prominence of a religiously conservative politics.
- The rise of evangelicalism in the 1970s and 80s was real and statistically significant, but it amounted to adding roughly one American in twenty to the ranks of the evangelicals. The change was hardly massive, except by comparison to the collapsing mainline Protestant denominations.
 - The total volume of church attendance in America—the number of people sitting in pews somewhere in an average week—has fallen fairly significantly since the early 1990s. The relatively stable attendance at evangelical churches has been more than offset by major declines in Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, especially since the early 1990s.
 - The evangelical boom that began in the 1970s was over by the early 1990s, nearly two decades ago. In the 21st century America expansive evangelicalism is a feature of the past, not the present.
 - What did we learn about religion in America during the late 1970s and 1980s:
 1. The hemorrhage of religious observance characteristic of the long Sixties was stanching and to some extent reversed, at least among better educated young people. Americans seemed to be getting back in touch with God. This impression was strengthened by the rise of evangelical churches. The tectonic movements of the 1970s and 1980s were most visible in the conservative half of the American religious landscape. Why? – for the most part evangelical parents had more children than other parents, and they did a better job of keeping their children in the family’s religious tradition. More kids, more of whom stay in the faith, must mean more people of that faith in the next generation. Evangelical churches also gained because of new converts.
 2. In the 1970s and 80s most educated evangelical young people stayed in their original faith, thus swelling evangelical churches, while at the same time moving evangelicalism as a whole up the social scale. The loyalty of evangelical children rose simultaneously with the first aftershock.
 3. The great organizational energy and inventiveness of evangelical religious leaders also contributed to the growth of evangelicals in America.
 4. The single most crucial element in the success of the evangelical movement after the long Sixties, we believe, was captured in St. Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians to stand firmly for their faith, “for if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” This was an age of turmoil that many Americans found deeply repugnant to their fundamental moral and religious views. Evangelicals were prepared to heed Paul’s advice and stand up for their values.

- The most important results of the first aftershock was that religion itself and conservatism (theological, social, moral, and political) became increasingly symbiotic and identified, especially in the public eye, as the Religious Right. To many religious Americans, this alignment of religion and politics represented a long-sought consummation, an appropriate retort to the excesses of the Sixties. Many other Americans were not so sure.
- **Aftershock #2 (1990s-2000s): The Rise of Secular Generations:** a reaction to religiously conservative politics. The younger generations saw religion as mainly concerned about conservative politics and especially about traditional positions of sexual morality, like homosexuality. In effect, many of these Americans who might have been religious, but were liberal on moral issues, said “if that’s what religion is all about, then it’s not for me.” The second aftershock during the 1990s and 2000s thrust a substantial number of Americans, especially young Americans, in a decidedly nonreligious direction.
- It was the rise of the Nones after 1990 that marked unmistakably the beginning this third temblor.
 - Just like the earlier turning points, the rise of the Nones in the 1990s was heavily driven by generational factors. The incidence of Nones was about 5-7% in the pre-boomer generations who reach adulthood before 1960, double to about 10-15% among the boomers (who came of age in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s), and after 2000 doubled again to about 20-30% among the post-boomers (who came of age in the 1990s and 2000s).
 - Nor is there any evidence in this figure that as the younger generations age, they are becoming more attached to organized religion—quite the contrary! Since 2000 generational succession has meant that cohorts of whom barely 5% say they have no religious affiliation are being replaced by cohorts of whom roughly 25% say they have no religion, massively increasing the nationwide incidence of Nones.
 - As in the earlier shock and aftershock, Americans themselves noticed the second aftershock. The “gaining influence/losing influence” ratio in response to the standard Gallup query about religion in America plummeted from 69:14 in 1957 to 14:75 in 1970, as Americans registered the shock of the Sixties. During the first decade of the 21st century that ratio dropped from 55:39 in 2001 to 25:70, as Americans again sensed the ground moving. The Richter rating of this second aftershock is greater than that of the first aftershock and rivals that of the powerful original quake of the Sixties.
 - The shock is most visible among the youngest generation: over 25% of young adults 18-29. What do we know about the Nones:
 1. Except that they are heavily drawn from post-boomer cohorts, they do not differ much from the rest of the US population.
 2. The new Nones are not uniformly non-believers, and few of them claim to be atheists or agnostics. Indeed, most of them express belief in God and even in the afterlife, and many of them say that religion is important in their lives. They

reject conventional religious affiliation, while not entirely giving up their religious feelings.

3. The Nones were disproportionately raised in nonreligious backgrounds, so some of them are the children of boomers who have discarded formal religious affiliations a generation ago. As Hout and Fisher put it, “being raised with no religion fueled cohort change.” On the other hand, the rise of the Nones is apparent even among young people whose parents were religiously observant. Of all Nones in the 2006 Faith Matters survey (conducted by Putnam and Campbell), 74% report that their parents had been religiously affiliated, 56% report that their family attended religious services nearly every week when they were growing up, and 51 % say that they attended Sunday school or religious education classes “very often.” Since these figures of religious upbringing are only modestly lower than the comparable figures for all Americans of the relevant generation, inheritance accounts for only a fraction of the recent increases in Nones.
 4. Because the rise of the Nones was so abrupt, this increase seems unlikely to reflect secularization in any ordinary sense, since theories of secularization refer to developments that transpire over decades or even centuries, not just a few years.
 5. The new Nones are drawn heavily from the center and left of the political spectrum. Our Faith Matters survey confirm that few of the new Nones come from the right half of the political spectrum. The rise of the Nones might be some sort of reaction to religious conservatism.
- Around 1990 the climate of opinion in America, especially (but not only) among the youngest cohort, took a sharp turn toward liberal views on marijuana and especially homosexuality. As it happens, the time of that influence point is virtually identical to the timing of the rise of the new Nones. There was no similar shift in young people views about premarital sex (approved by roughly four fifths even since the shock of the late 1960s). Moreover, young people’s view about abortion continue to move in a conservative direction during the 1990s and 2000s. But the simultaneity of the shifts on two important moral or lifestyle norms, and the rise of the new Nones, seems unlikely to be coincidental.
 - Furthermore, the young people whose views on these issues, especially homosexuality, were more liberal were the very same people now disclaiming any religious identity. Taking both demographic factors and social and political attitudes into account, what distinguishes the new Nones among the millennials after 1991 is, above all, their liberal stance on homosexuality. Those millennials whose views on homosexuality are more tolerant are more than twice as likely to be religious Nones as their statistically similar peers who are conservative on homosexuality.
 - Something had caused the younger generation to be more liberal on these moral issues, and those very same young people increasingly rejected organized religion, forming the lion’s share of the new Nones. Moreover, when we look closely at the individuals who

reduced their religious engagement between our interviews with them in 2006 and 2007—becoming Nones (instead of “somethings”) and reporting lower church attendance—we find that their attitudes on moral issues were strong predictors of who would change, even holding other factors constant, including their level of religiosity in 2006. This pattern provides some modest additional evidence that liberal views on sexual morality contributed to their dissatisfaction from religion.

- We suggest the dramatic contrast between a young generation increasingly liberal on certain moral and lifestyle issues (though still potentially open to religious feelings and ideals) and an older generation of religious leaders who seemed to them consumed by the political fight against gay marriage was an important source of the second aftershock.
- It is not surprising that younger Americans, still forming religious attachments, translated their uneasiness about mixing religion and politics into a rejection of religious attachments. This group of young people came of age when “religion” was identified publicly with the Religious Right, and exactly at the time when the leaders of that movement put homosexuality and gay marriage at the top of their agenda. And yet this is the very generation in which the new tolerance for homosexuality has grown most rapidly. In short, just as the youngest cohort of Americans was zigging in one direction, many highly visible religious leaders zagged in the other.
- When asked why they rejected religious identification, the new Nones reported that “they became unaffiliated, at least in part, because they think of religious people as hypocritical, judgmental, or insincere. Large numbers also say they became unaffiliated because they think that religious organizations focus too much on rules and not enough on spirituality” (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life). This youthful generation seems unwilling or unable to distinguish the stance of the most visible, most political, and most conservative religious leaders from organized religion in general.

Chapter 5: Switching, Matching, and Mixing

Inheriting Versus Choosing Religion

- Compared to other aspects of our selves—our attitudes, values, identities, habits—our religious outlooks are, in fact, highly stable. From year to year, most Americans have firm, stable commitments on religious topics. But, over the course of a lifetime, individual change in religious outlook turns out to be important. Today, religious identity has become less inherited and fixed, and more chosen and changeable.
- **“Liminals”**: There are a large number of people who seem to be standing at the edge of a religious tradition, half in and half out. Sometimes we catch them thinking of themselves as a something (Baptist or Catholic or whatever), and other times they think of themselves as a “None.” We have come to call these people, who seem to be standing on the threshold of a religious tradition, betwixt and between, “liminals,” from the Latin word for “threshold.” These religious liminals are distributed around each of the major religious traditions in roughly the

same proportion so that each tradition (and each denomination) seems to be surrounded by a penumbra of roughly 10% who are liminal members, neither entirely in nor entirely out.

- Most Americans share the same religious identity as their parents, and in that sense religion appears to be inherited. In round numbers nearly 75% of all Americans espouse the religious tradition in which they were raised. However that figure is slightly misleading because:
 - For children of religiously mixed marriages, “parents’ religion” is ambiguous.
 - According to the 2007 Faith Matters survey nearly 20% of Americans were raised in a religion different from their parents’ religion, even when the parents shared a single religion, so there is obviously additional slippage between their “original” religion and their parents’ religion.
 - A significant number of those who are currently in the religion of their parents—10%—had switched away for a while, before returning to their original faith.
 - Another significant fraction of Protestants, while still in their original religious tradition, such as mainline Protestant, have switched to a different denomination (say, from Presbyterian to Methodist).
- Less than two-thirds of all Americans simply inherit their parents’ religion. Moreover, fidelity to one’s parents’ religion is twice as high among blacks and Latinos as among whites and Asian Americans. **So all things considered, roughly 35-40% of all Americans and 40-45% of white Americans have switched at some point away from their parents’ religion.** In short, it is misleading to think of religious identity in contemporary America as an inherited and stable characteristic.
- Yet a further qualification to the image of religion as transmitted faithfully from generation to generation arises when we take into account not only what religious affiliation a person claims, but also whether he or she is religiously observant. While more than half of adult children of Mormons and Evangelical Protestants in America today remain observant of their parents’ faith, the same is true of fewer than half of “Anglo” Catholics and mainline Protestants and only about one fifth of Jews.
- All things considered we Americans seem less firmly anchored in our various religious heritages than we were a generation or two ago.
- The most dramatic change in religious inheritance over the 20th century was the dramatic increase in the fraction of people raised without a religious affiliation who stayed that way as an adult. The retention rates of Nones is actually higher than that of the major religious traditions today. This is yet another symptom of the second aftershock, which has made many youth conclude that religion is not for them.
- **The most important factor predicting religious retention is whether a person’s family of origin was religiously homogeneous and observant, or not.** Children of mixed marriages are much more likely to leave the faith within which they were raised—more likely to become Nones or attend religious services rarely. People who were involved as children in religious activities, such as Sunday school, are significantly less likely to leave their parents’ faith as adults.

- Switching religious traditions (leaving one's original religion) is up, and nonmarital switching is up even more. **The implication: more and more Americans are choosing their religion independently of both their family of origin and their current family.**
- Most nonreligious Americans were raised in religiously active homes, and that is still true today. In short most secular Americans are much more intimately familiar with religious beliefs and practices than their secular counterparts in Europe. On the other hand, if our analysis of generational gains and losses is accurate and (more conjecturally) if these trends continue unabated into the future, the personal basis for that comity will be weaker a generation from now, since increasing numbers of Americans will never have experienced religion firsthand, even as children.
- **Many Americans—at least one third and rising—nowadays choose their religion rather than simply inheriting it. Religion in America is increasingly a domain of choice, churn, and surprisingly low brand loyalty.**

Summing Up

- Roughly half of white Americans have departed from their parents' religious stance, either through switching to a different religious tradition or through lapsing into religious indifference.
- Both intermarriage and defection from family religious tradition are lower among ethnic minorities, as well as among the most devoutly religious families.
- Roughly half of all married Americans choose a partner from a different religious tradition.
- For virtually all religious traditions the rate of religious inheritance decline and the rate of intermarriage rose over the course of the 20th century, especially for Catholics.
- One result of all these changes is that individual choice has become virtually as important as inheritance in explaining American religious affiliations, raising the stakes for religious marketing and innovation. A second implication, perhaps less obvious but more important, is that Americans now live in a more religiously integrated society.

Chapter 15: America's Grace: How a Tolerant Nation Bridges its Religious Divides

- How can America be both devout and diverse without fracturing along religious lines?
- Most Americans embrace religious diversity—including those who are highly secular and those who are highly religious. Many Americans experience religious diversity on a personal scale. Americans typically have friends and family of different faiths, creating their own religiously diverse social networks. The diversity embodied within these networks enables the peaceful coexistence of myriad religions in contemporary America.

- Americans see the value in religious diversity for its own sake. When asked whether “religious diversity has been good for America,” 84% agree. Those with the highest levels of religiosity, still endorse religious diversity overwhelming: 74%.
- In the most intimate association of all—marriage—Americans are increasingly comfortable with religious diversity. One-third of all Americans are married to someone of a different religious tradition, and one-half are married to someone who came from a different tradition (the difference being explained by spousal conversions).
- Americans live in religiously diverse neighborhoods: only 7% say that all of the neighbors share the same religion; nearly a third report that none do.
- **Most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths.** This is the most important reason that Americans can combine religious devotion and diversity. Having a religiously diverse social network leads to a more positive assessment of specific religious groups. Religious diversity within social networks—**religious bridging**—fosters greater interreligious acceptance. (Gaining an evangelical friend means a more positive evaluation of evangelicals; gaining a nonreligious friend means warmer regard for “people who are not religious.”)
- Most of the American population—save a small but intensely religious segment—are reluctant to give a unique status to any religion as “true,” even their own. A majority of Americans believe that members of other faiths can go to heaven, and this is true even in religions that explicitly teach that salvation is reserved for their own adherents. Across a range of Christian denominations we see a disconnect between the leaders at the pulpits and the people in the pews. Most Christian clergy see salvation as exclusively Christian, while most Christians have a more—if not completely—inclusive view of who will be saved in the hereafter.
- Americans’ expansive view of heaven results from their personal experience with people with different religious backgrounds, including their close friends and family. Americans manage to be both religiously diverse and religiously devout because it is difficult to damn those you know and love.
- A small minority of Americans (10%) are true believers who say that people of other faiths cannot reach heaven and “one religion is true and others are not.” First, this group of true believers is more intensely religious. They are absolutely sure about God’s existence. Religion is fundamental to their personal identity and daily life. They are twice as likely as other Americans to attend church every week (many of them more than once). And because they are passionate about their faith, they are much more active in personal evangelism. Second, they have a very clear, religiously derived sense of good and evil; they are moral absolutists. Third, they are deeply conservative, especially on moral issues, above all on questions of sexual morality. Fourth, they are somewhat less comfortable with religious pluralism and with the idea that religion and morality are primarily private and personal matters. They are less convinced that religious diversity is a good thing. Finally, they live in more religiously monochromatic social environments.
- Interreligious mixing, mingling, and marrying have kept America’s religious melting pot from boiling over.