

Introduction

UNDERSTANDING RELIGION IN AMERICA

“In God We Trust” was first printed on US coins in 1864 during one of the most divisive periods of US history—the Civil War era. This motto endures as a symbol of both religion’s importance in American society and religion’s potential to unite and divide. Proponents of first placing “In God We Trust” on money considered it a national disgrace to not recognize God on US coins.¹ In a proposal to Congress, the secretary of the Treasury and the director of the US Mint characterized the addition to coins as “expressive of a national reliance on Divine protection, and a distinct and unequivocal national recognition of the Divine sovereignty—the claim to be a Christian nation.”²

Abraham Lincoln was the first president of the United States to sign this act of Congress into law. Analyzing Lincoln’s personal letters and Second Inaugural Address, Justin Latterell suggests that although most proponents for adding “In God We Trust” to coins appear to have done so out of nationalistic pride and as an appeal to God’s favor toward the nation, Lincoln saw it as an assertion of humility.³ Latterell argues that Lincoln likely understood the phrase as “a recognition of the inherent distinction between the providential will of God and the political wills of warring peoples.”⁴ These different interpretations of the same venerated

phrase demonstrate the centrality of religion as a system of meaning in American life while at the same time revealing that religion is often understood and experienced by different Americans in different ways.

These four short words, “In God We Trust,” have fallen in and out of favor over time and across regions, reflecting interesting dynamics and complexities in the religiousness of the US population. In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt took the motto off two coins during a congressional recess, arguing that the motto on money was a form of irreverence that cheapened the phrase.⁵ During the 1950s, a time of increased religious and nationalistic fervor in response to the Cold War and the spread of communism, “In God We Trust” was legislated as the official motto of the United States, and it was mandated that the motto appear on paper currency. Around the same time, the Pledge of Allegiance was revised to add the words “under God.”⁶ More recently, states such as Arkansas (in 2017) and Florida (in 2018) have mandated that “In God We Trust” be visibly displayed in their public schools. You can find the motto carved in stone on many public monuments, courthouses, and government buildings.

The history and use of these four words, “In God We Trust,” reflect the long, dynamic, complex, and contested importance of religion, in particular Christianity, in American society. In the spirit of this observation, this book examines the changes over time, and the remarkable stability, in the religious composition and religiousness of America. We apply demographic, congregational, and historical perspectives to reveal rich and complex processes underlying previously documented, general trends for the entire US population. What results is a fuller picture of the people for whom religion is or is not changing, the engines for religious change where it occurs, how individual-level religious change shapes and is shaped by religious institutions, and religion’s role in the distribution of power and influence in the United States.

DEFINING RELIGION AND RELIGIOUSNESS

In thinking about the state of religion in the United States, how do we define *religion*? Because religion is such an abstract concept, it is challenging to find a definition that is both broad enough to cover the variety

of and diversity in world religions and specific enough to not include social institutions, belief systems, or rituals that are not generally understood as religions, such as magic or sports.

For centuries, scholars have been working out definitions of religion that guide social scientists. These definitions often reference *social groups* or *institutions* that unite around a certain set of *beliefs* or *practices* (see box 1 for a commonly referenced set of sociological definitions of religion). Thus, as we discuss religion throughout the book, we primarily focus on the social and institutional forms religions take and the beliefs and practices individuals hold.

Next, what exactly is *religiousness*, or the degree to which a person engages in religion? Think of the most religious person and the least religious person you know. What are the characteristics that make them more, or less, religious in your mind? Are you thinking of whether they consider themselves to belong to a certain religion or religious group? Are you considering how often they practice religion in a public way, maybe by attending worship services at a religious institution? Or, are you focused on more private practices such as prayer or meditation? Do you factor in how important religion seems to be in their lives? Maybe they are public about how religion shapes other aspects of their lives, including religious dress, eating or drinking restrictions, their sexual behavior, civic involvement, or their political views. It is probably some combination of these features of religiousness that everyone draws upon in classifying people religiously. Social scientists typically call these features *dimensions* of religiousness, and they are often interested in levels of these different dimensions in the population, such as average levels of religious service attendance, and the causes and consequences of any change in such levels.

At this point, you might be wondering how the concept of spirituality relates to religion or religiousness. Spirituality is a term that has grown in use since the 1970s, according to Google Books Ngram Viewer.⁷ People define spirituality in a variety of ways. Some focus on practices or rituals conducted apart from major world religions in the interest of acknowledging or connecting with a divine force. These people often call themselves spiritual and not religious. Others use the concept of spirituality to characterize their own practice of a major world religion. In fact, many conservative Christians identify as spiritual and not religious to indicate a form of

Box 1 SOCIAL DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”—Karl Marx (1978 [1844], 54)

“A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”—Emile Durkheim (1995 [1912], 44)

Religion is “a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate [people] to the ultimate conditions of [their] existence.”—Robert Bellah (1964, 359)

“Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. . . . By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience.”—Peter Berger (1967, 25)

“Religion, then, can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations.”—J. Milton Yinger (1970, 7)

“Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”—Clifford Geertz (1973, 90)

“Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad.”—Christian Smith (2017, 22)

faith or devotion that is personal, based on a connection with God, and not ritualistic. Most people in the United States, however, identify as spiritual *and* religious. Spirituality is associated with personal experiences of transcendence or meaningfulness through divine connection.⁸ Religion or religiousness is associated with structured, institutionally supported beliefs and behaviors that connect one human being to others and provide a road-map for how to live.⁹ Although we do occasionally discuss spirituality, for most of the book we focus on the concepts of religion and religiousness, which include forms of spirituality that overlap with or are understood as occurring in connection to religion.

MEASURING CHANGE IN AMERICAN RELIGION

The most common approach to tracking the religious character of America, at least in recent times, has been the use of national survey data to analyze self-reports of religious affiliation, frequency of religious service attendance, rates of prayer, and strength of beliefs. Most studies of this type describe trends from the 1970s forward because the longest-running, highest-quality data available on religious trends come from the General Social Survey (GSS), which started in 1972.¹⁰ The GSS is a nationally representative survey that has been systematically fielded at least every other year since 1972. Questions on the GSS measure social attitudes, religious beliefs and behaviors, and demographic characteristics like racial/ethnic identity or educational attainment. With national surveys like the GSS or the National Congregations Study (NCS), social scientists can study how religious attitudes and behaviors are related to other important social factors, such as political affiliation, and track changes over time in individual-level beliefs or organizational characteristics.

Throughout this book, we also refer to research using forms of data other than surveys, like ethnographic research involving fieldnotes and interviews; less structured, interview-based studies that result in qualitative data for analysis; or comparative-historical research using archival data. Although research relying on methods such as these is often not statistically generalizable, it does contribute in ways that survey research often cannot, in part by offering the ability to discover and richly describe

meanings and processes that are at the core of religious belief and practice and that are not well anticipated or measured in survey research.

Although the reliance on survey data from the past forty or so years is partly driven by using the most comprehensive and nationally representative survey data available, there are other reasons this time span is an appropriate historical focus. Poll data suggest that religiousness rose to a relative high in the 1960s, and a great deal of social change of the type that is assumed to alter the authority and practice of religion in society has occurred since then. These changes (which are highly interrelated themselves) include the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the United States, dramatic increases in educational attainment and women's labor force participation, the sexual revolution and the availability of contraception, and family changes such as the postponement of marriage and childbearing, reduced fertility, and increases in divorce, nonmarital cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing.

The dimensions of religion or religiousness most consistently measured in the GSS are, not surprisingly, the most commonly analyzed in the field, so they are the main focus of both the studies we review and the original analyses we share in this book. These include self-identified religious affiliation, self-reported frequency of religious service attendance, and self-reported frequency of prayer.

GENERAL TRENDS IN RELIGION IN AMERICA

In the substantive chapters of this book, we will demonstrate that population-level analyses of religious trends over time—for example, looking at the average number of times all Americans attend religious services in a month—gloss over much of the richness and complexity that make religion in the United States interesting. This is because there are distinctive patterns for different groups in the United States, including variations across racial and ethnic groups, particularities in the religious involvement of young and old people, and changes in the nature of congregations in which people worship. Similarly, these analyses ignore the role religion plays in American history and in what ways religion continues to draw dividing lines between groups of people. However, in order to document

this variation in subsequent chapters, it is helpful to first establish some basic trends in the United States as a whole to help understand why the variation we uncover later is relevant to the story of religion in America.

Two of the most substantial changes in the American religious landscape of late pertain to how Americans affiliate themselves religiously.¹¹ First, the percentage of the population identifying with a mainstream, or what most researchers term a mainline Protestant group (e.g., members of the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, or the Presbyterian Church (USA), among others),¹² has shrunk in half from just over 25 percent in 1972 to 13 percent in 2014.¹³ Second, the percentage of Americans who have no religious affiliation has tripled, growing from around 6 percent in 1972 to 20 percent in 2014.¹⁴ Scholars sometimes refer to people who report no religious affiliation as the religious “Nones” (Not to be confused with religious N-U-N-S!), but we will refer to them as the “religiously unaffiliated.” We use that term to be as precise as possible because having no institutional affiliation does not necessarily mean a person has no religious beliefs or practices.¹⁵ There has been relative stability in the percentage of Americans who identify with conservative or Evangelical Protestant groups, like Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, and many non-denominational churches. The same has been true for Catholics. Each group has made up almost a quarter of the US population over time.¹⁶

Because the United States has been heralded as a religiously diverse nation since its beginning, many people are surprised to discover just how small the proportions of Jewish, Latter-day Saint (Mormon), Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist affiliates remain in the US population (see table 1). The Jewish population has seen a slight decline over the past few decades, a decline largely attributed to growing numbers of young people who identify as Jewish ethnically, but not religiously.¹⁷ On the other hand, although they are still a very small part of the US population, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists have grown in number since the 2000s. This almost entirely stems from these religious groups’ increased immigration to the United States from countries where their religions are predominant.

When it comes to rates of religious practice in the United States, recent studies suggest there has been a slight overall decline in the population

Table 1 Trends in religious affiliation, United States, 1972–2016 (General Social Survey); N=59,205

<i>Religious Affiliation</i>	<i>1970s (%)</i>	<i>1980s (%)</i>	<i>1990s (%)</i>	<i>2000s (%)</i>	<i>2010s (%)</i>
Evangelical Protestant	21.96	26.61	27.57	25.70	25.20
Mainline Protestant	29.23	23.47	19.32	15.32	12.44
Black Protestant	9.31	8.02	8.31	8.07	7.02
Catholic	27.08	27.19	26.11	27.06	25.91
Jewish	2.35	2.04	1.99	2.00	1.77
Latter-day Saints	0.79	2.17	1.26	1.30	1.04
Hindu	NA	NA	0.06	0.37	0.48
Muslim	NA	NA	0.12	0.61	0.71
Buddhist	NA	NA	0.06	0.72	0.80
Other religion	2.42	3.11	4.74	3.12	3.25
No religious affiliation	6.85	7.40	10.46	15.73	21.38

NOTE: The first five categories of affiliation are coded as recommended by Steensland et al. (2000) and Stetzer and Burge (2016). The remaining categories are coded as reported, except the “Other” category, which is a combination of remaining smaller religious groups. Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim were not added as religious traditions in the GSS until 1998.

average of religious service attendance over the past four decades.¹⁸ The average level of prayer has seen a statistically significant decrease since 1988; however, the year-by-year trends show many offsetting increases and decreases.¹⁹ Wachholtz and Sambamoorthi, for example, found an increase in the percentage of people in the United States who reported praying about their mental or physical health between 2001 and 2007.²⁰ The steepest decline in the average frequency of prayer has really taken place over the past ten years or so; it thus remains to be seen whether that trend will continue into the next decade.

Findings from the World Values Survey show that among postindustrial countries, the United States has some of the highest levels of religious participation and frequency of prayer, levels similar to those found in Ireland and Italy, two steadfastly Catholic countries. By comparison, France, Denmark, and Great Britain show the lowest levels—at least of these indicators of religiousness.²¹

An additional barometer by which to assess religious change in the United States over time is to look at how individuals have responded to

questions about their beliefs in certain religious concepts or ideas. The proportion of adults in the United States who believe in life after death has been increasing since the 1970s, from 75 percent at that time to 80 percent in 2014.²² There is little evidence of a population-level decline in *some* belief in God across time.²³ However, there has been a downturn in *absolute* belief in God, from around 65 percent (where it had generally held since 1988) in 2000 to 58 percent in 2014.²⁴ Also, the percentage of those who believe the Bible is to be taken literally has declined from just under 40 percent in the 1980s to just under 35 percent in the 1990s, dropping closer to 30 percent in the 2000s.²⁵ In short, the evidence we have from the GSS and other data suggests that some religious beliefs are as strong today as they were over four decades ago while other beliefs have weakened.²⁶

Compared to other wealthy Western countries, the United States holds very high average levels of religious belief.²⁷ Two other countries in which approximately 95 percent of the population believed in God in 1947, Canada and Australia, experienced declines to 88 and 75 percent, respectively, while the United States maintained that level through 2001.²⁸ When it comes to the percentage of the population that believes in life after death, this group actually grew in the United States between 1947 and 2001, while the percentage believing in an afterlife fell in most other postindustrial countries—from 68 to 47 percent in the Netherlands, for example.²⁹

Taking these trends as a whole, we find it difficult to evaluate the extent to which religion is on the decline in the United States. One major challenge in making a general claim about the religious direction or trajectory of the US population is that there are so many different dimensions of religion (and therefore measures of it) to consider. Moreover, there is evidence that the decline in religious affiliation and involvement, especially over the past two decades, has primarily occurred among those who were only marginally involved initially. These loosely affiliated or involved persons are now more likely to report no religious affiliation or practice.³⁰ What is not clear is the extent to which this is a result of actual loss of belief and practice or of an increasing comfort in stating the absent or minimal role of religion in one's life to another person during a survey interview.³¹



Figure 1. Aggregate Religiosity Index (ARI), United States, 1952–2005. This figure shows the ARI for each year during this period. The scores are standardized to a mean of one hundred and a standard deviation of ten. The dotted lines show 95 percent confidence intervals based on bootstrapped standard errors. The index is republished with permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>, from J. Tobin Grant (2008), “Measuring Aggregate Religiosity in the United States, 1952–2005,” published in *Sociological Spectrum* 28 (5): 460–76.

Another limitation to drawing broad conclusions about the historical trajectory of religion in the United States using GSS survey data is that these surveys only began in 1972, when all measures of religion reflected particularly high rates of religiousness. There is a temptation, then, to look at some of the downward trends, extrapolate backward, and assume that the farther back in time you go, the more religious the US population proves to be. For many, a religiously nostalgic view is tempting, but evidence from prior times suggests that today’s levels of religiousness are not so different from the early 1900s or earlier and that the high religiousness of the 1950s may have been an anomaly. For example, Grant estimates a general level of religiousness for the United States from 1952 to 2005 using a measure of *aggregate religiosity* that draws on multiple data

sources and dimensions of religion (see figure 1).³² These methods produce evidence of a quite dramatic increase in religiousness from the early 1950s through the early 1960s.

Similarly, Finke and Stark merge a great deal of historical data on religious denominations and congregational or membership counts to demonstrate that the dynamics of religious institutions and membership started as far back as the 1700s.³³ They make a very compelling case for stability, if not for a boost in religious vitality, in the United States over time. Their assertion is that the rise in religiousness from colonial America into the future relies on the growth in numbers of religious institutions and memberships, and the documented higher increases in contexts that are seemingly more modern (e.g., urban areas) provide evidence that religion is not dying, especially not in relation to modernization.

Although some may believe that religion has been on the decline in the United States ever since the nation's founding, or that religiousness has remained unusually high and stable throughout US history, the truth is that religious patterns in the United States are complicated. Adding to the challenges of accurately characterizing the state of religion in America are key complexities underlying overall trends, such as diversity across demographic subgroups, changes in the demographic composition of the US population, the centrality of religious institutions (or congregations) in American religious life, and religion's historical role in defining and protecting social power and privilege in the United States. In this book, we clarify overall trends by revealing their components and drivers and by using three different lenses for understanding religion in America: the demographic, the congregational, and the historical.

A DEMOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGE IN AMERICAN RELIGION

The idea that religion is weakening in society is not just a popular news headline; it is also at the core of perhaps the longest-running and most contentious social theory of religion—secularization theory. Secularization theory has most often been discussed and applied in the contexts of the United States and Western Europe over the last century. There is much

debate as to how exactly the theory is specified and what the best evidence is for testing the theory.³⁴ However, the language and ideas of secularization theory still very much dominate popular and scholarly discourse about the state of religion in society today. And, like it or not, the evidence brought to bear in these conversations usually involves trends in survey data comprised of individuals' self-reports of religious affiliation, practices, and beliefs. There are at least two problems with this approach. First, population-level trends can obfuscate different patterns of change for different subgroups in the population. Second, social changes, such as shifting levels of religiousness, are not only driven by people changing their beliefs and behaviors; they also result from changes in the composition of the population and changes in the size of subgroups. Thus, a fuller understanding of the state of religion in America over time requires attention to demographic processes underlying general trends.

A demographic perspective focuses on the composition of populations and how populations (and their components) change. Part of understanding a population involves understanding its demographics or the meaningful subgroups within it. When it comes to religion, we know that the experience and practice of it, in the United States and elsewhere, vary a great deal by demographics such as race/ethnicity, gender, and social class. Thus, it is important to follow differing trends across these various subgroups to know which ones might be driving certain forms of change or stability at the population level.

Furthermore, three key drivers of population change at large or within various demographic subgroups are births, deaths, and migration. Through these core processes, the age structure and other demographic features of a population can be altered. In addition, another set of demographic processes that results in population level change over time involves age, period, and cohort effects. Age effects refer to strong average patterns in how religious people are at various ages; period effects are when major events can trigger religious changes in everyone; and cohort effects come from people who were born about the same time living through a series of events at certain age points together, making their generation's life experiences and consequences uniquely influential on them in certain ways.³⁵

Because the religiousness of certain demographic subgroups in the population (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, age groups, etc.) varies in all dimen-

sions (e.g., affiliation, attendance, prayer, importance, etc.), change in the distribution of these groups in the population will shift levels of religiousness even if individual-level religious change is rare. Furthermore, new generations arrive on the scene and mature as older generations die, so if there is something different about how newer generations are religious (even if they remain stable over time), the loss of older generations will alter the religious makeup of the population through death without any conscious change among those who are living. For these reasons, it is important to think demographically about religion in the United States as a population phenomenon in addition to theorizing about why individuals may themselves experience religious changes (e.g., switching affiliations, attending religious services more or less often, or having their beliefs weaken) that aggregate up to the societal level.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of this book demonstrate the utility of a demographic perspective in understanding religious change. While the big picture trends in religion described above are often presented as if they represent overall changes for everyone in the United States, we show considerable diversity in how people from different racial and ethnic groups practice and experience religion in chapter 1. This chapter outlines differences in religious beliefs and behaviors for different racial/ethnic groups in the United States, including Black-White differences and Latinx American, Arab American, and Asian American distinctiveness. For example, there is a long-standing pattern of Black people being more religious than White people (on average), and there is considerable diversity in both religious affiliation and religious practices in different subgroups of Asian Americans. There are many explanations for these patterns, including historical exclusion and migration experiences (such as when and from which countries people migrate to the United States). We also document some of the ways that these differences between racial and ethnic groups have diverged or converged over the past few decades. In doing so, we break down simplified portraits of religious change in America to reveal distinctive trends for particular racial and ethnic subgroups in the United States.

In chapter 2, we dissect population trends in religion even further by considering gender and social class. Because race/ethnicity, gender, and social class serve as sources of both identity and social stratification, they intersect with religious identification and involvement in important and complex

ways.³⁶ Many women's roles as mothers and their lower levels of labor force participation in earlier decades are two explanations for why women have historically been more religious than men. Likewise, the middle-class orientation of many religious communities often serves as a barrier to those with lower education and incomes, creating a gap in religious service attendance by social class. Paying attention to these structural complexities and how they combine enables us to think about even smaller and more specific subgroups, such as Black, college-educated women or White men with a high school degree, and to try to capture some level of intersectionality in relation to religious trends.³⁷ Additionally, the differences across these demographic subgroups provide contexts for understanding why changes in their size relative to other groups in the population (whether growing or shrinking) are important in any conversation about trends in religiousness in the United States. We tackle these issues of the varying composition of the US population and their role in religious change in chapter 3.

Chapter 3 discusses the core of what it means to study religion from a demographic perspective, and it outlines some of the key tools of demographic analysis: decomposing age, period, and cohort effects. We focus on questions like: Do people become more religious as they form families or as they grow older and ask tough questions about the afterlife? Do we see these changes over time in religion because there was some major event or change in the United States that resulted in lower levels of religious involvement? Or do we see a slight decline because each generation is less religious than their parents? These questions highlight the importance of studying trends in religion from each angle of age, period, and cohort, and the ways in which these trends can have overlapping effects. Then we present new analyses representing how population changes in fertility, mortality, and migration—three important fields of study for demographers—are related to religious change over time. We also examine what happens over time when social change and the resulting shifts in the composition of the population that are thought to influence levels of religiousness—such as increased educational attainment, delayed family formation, and an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse population—occur. These factors do not play as substantial a role as one might think in raising or lowering population levels of religiousness at this point, which indicates that American religion is somewhat resilient to other forms of social change.

In conjunction, these chapters demonstrate that the overarching, general population trends in religion in the United States often gloss over important variations across demographic groups and the impact that generational and compositional changes in the population can have regardless of whether any one American changes their religious beliefs or behaviors. Overemphasizing a slight overall trend of decline in religion over time ignores the vitality of religion within subpopulations such as Korean American immigrants. While some of these groups may only seem like small segments of the US population now, they are part of the shifting composition of the population, and paying attention to them helps us to recognize not only what the historic trends have been but also how these trends might change in the future as small groups become more significant portions of the population.

A CONGREGATIONAL FOCUS

It is important to remember that religion is not solely an individual activity but often takes place within groups and communities. Religious organizations and institutions represent another level at which we can study change over time in religious life in the United States. Congregations represent one of the most common forms of religious communities in the United States.³⁸

In responding to secularization theory and its proponents, some sociologists point to the open marketplace of religious involvement in the United States in which new religious groups are continually being born, adapting, and dying.³⁹ Instead of these multiple religious options serving as a threat to religion, pluralism of religious groups instead contributes to the remarkable religious vitality of the United States.⁴⁰ There is some debate about the findings of these studies, but they provide a unique lens to observe issues at the heart of the secularization thesis.⁴¹ They also establish the value in viewing American religion through an institutional or congregational lens.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the National Congregations Study (NCS) is a quantitative data source that allows us to track changes over time at the organizational level. Questions such as how many staff a congregation has, what is included in worship services, and what kinds of