

# Religious membership in the US falls below the majority

The portion of Americans who consider themselves members of a church, synagogue or mosque has dropped below 50%, according to a Gallup poll released Monday. It is the first time that has happened since Gallup first asked the question in 1937, when church membership was 73%.

In recent years, data has shown a U.S. shift away from religious institutions and toward general disaffiliation, a trend that analysts say could have major implications for politics, business, and how Americans group themselves. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque. The polling firm also found that the number of people who said religion was very important to them has fallen to 48%, a new low point in the polling since 2000.

For some Americans, religious membership is seen as a relic of an older generation, said Ryan Burge, an assistant professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University and a pastor in the American Baptist Church. Gallup's data finds that church membership is strongly correlated with age: 66% of American adults born before 1946 belong to a church, compared with 58% of baby boomers, 50% of those in Generation X, and 36% of millennials.

Burge said many Christians still attend church but do not consider membership to be important, especially those who attend nondenominational churches. But no matter how researchers measure people's faith – such as attendance, giving, self-identification – Americans' attachment to institutional religion is on the decline.

Burge, who recently published a book about disaffiliating Americans called "The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going," predicts that in the next 30 years, America will not have one dominant religion.

"We have to start thinking about what the world looks like in terms of politics, policy, social service," Burge said. "How do we feed the hungry, clothe the naked when Christians are half of what it was. Who picks up the slack, especially if the government isn't going to?"

The pandemic, which forced most churches to close in March 2020, has caused a

major disruption to American religious life, with most people unable to join weekly mass gatherings. However, polls have not found a significant impact on Americans' religiosity in the past year. Americans are more likely than people in other countries to say that their religious faith has become stronger during the pandemic, according to the Pew Research Center.

Tara Isabella Burton, author of "Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World," attributes the national decline in religious affiliation to two major trends among younger Americans. First, she points to broader shifts suggesting a larger distrust of institutions, including police and pharmaceutical companies. Some Americans are disillusioned by the behavior of religious leaders, including the Catholic sex abuse scandal and the strong White evangelical alignment with former president Donald Trump.

The other major trend Burton describes is how people are mixing and matching from various religious traditions to create their own. Many people who do not identify with a particular religious institution still say they believe in God or pray or do things that tend to be associated with faith.

"Why shouldn't I pray or meditate or attend a liturgy? Or perhaps I feel closer to the divine when I can do something privately rather than something that's prescribed for me," she said. "It's my own spin on it."

Younger generations that grew up with the Internet have a different kind of relationship with information, texts, and hierarchy, Burton said.

"Existing trends in American religious life were exacerbated by generations that grew up in Internet culture that celebrates ownership, the idea that you can re-create a meme or narrative," she said. "You have ownership over curating your own experience."

Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said in a recent essay for The Atlantic that what was once religious belief has been replaced by political belief in many communities.

On the political right, he said in an interview, conservative Christians focused on Trump as a political savior rather than focusing on their traditional questions of morality. Christians in the Republican Party, he said, are being less defined by their faith than by a set of more narrow concerns.

And on the political left, Hamid said, people have taken up religious notions such as sin and ex-communication and repurposed them for secular ends. Hamid said that because there are not clear leaders, such as priests or imams, or a transcendent source that defines belief, the standards for what is considered “woke” continues to change.

“The vacuum [of religion] can’t just remain a vacuum,” Hamid said. “Americans are believers in some sense, and there has to be structures of belief and belonging. The question is, what takes the place of that religious affiliation?”

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*The Washington Post’s Scott Clement contributed to this report.*

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