

# Abiding Faith

*Contrary to the popular impression that Americans have become more secular in some ways they are as religious as ever. But organized religion occupies less of Americans' time, and exerts less influence on society as a whole than in the past.*

BY MARK CHAVES

God is dead—or God is taking over. Depending on the headlines of the day, soothsayers pronounce the end of religion or the ascendancy of religious extremists. What is really going on?

Taking stock of religion is almost as old as religion itself. Tracking religious trends is difficult, however, when religion means so many different things. Should we look at belief in the supernatural? Frequency of formal religious worship? The role of faith in major life decisions? The power of individual religious movements? These different dimensions of religion can change in different ways. Whether religion is declining or not depends on the definition of religion and what signifies a decline.

Perhaps the most basic manifestation of religious observance is piety: individual belief and participation in formal religious worship. Recent research on trends in American piety supports neither simple secularization nor staunch religious resilience in the face of modern life. Instead, Americans seem to believe as much but practice less.

## RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Conventional Judeo-Christian religious belief remains very high in the United States, and little evidence suggests it has declined in recent decades. Gallup polls and other surveys show that more than 90 percent of Americans believe in a higher power, and more than 60 percent are certain that God exists. Approximately 80 percent believe in miracles and in life after death, 70 percent believe in heaven, and 60 percent believe in hell. Far fewer Americans—from two in three in 1963 to one in three today—believe the Bible is the literal Word of God. The number who say the Bible is either the inerrant or the inspired Word of God is still impressively high, however—four of every five.

Religious faith in the United States is more broad than deep, and it has been for as long as it has

been tracked. Of Americans who say the Bible is either the actual or the inspired Word of God, only half can name the first book in the Bible and only one-third can say who preached the Sermon on the Mount. More than 90 percent believe in a higher power, but only one-third say they rely more on that power than on themselves in overcoming adversity. People who claim to be born-again or evangelical Christians are no less likely than others to believe in ideas foreign to traditional Christianity, such as reincarnation (20 percent of all Americans), channeling (17 percent), or astrology (26 percent), and they are no less likely to have visited a fortune teller (16 percent).

Despite the superficiality of belief among many, the percentage of Americans expressing religious faith is still remarkably high. How should we understand this persistent religious belief? High levels of religious belief in the United States seem to show that, contrary to widespread expectations of many scholars, industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, advances in science and other developments associated with modern life do not automatically undermine religious belief. In part this is because modernization does not immunize people against the human experiences that inspire religious sentiment. As anthropologist Mary Douglas points out, scientific advances do not make us less likely to feel awe and wonder when we ponder the universe and its workings. For example, our feelings of deference to physicians, owing to their experience and somewhat mysterious scientific knowledge, may not be so different from the way other people feel about traditional healers—even if the outcomes of treatment are indeed different. Likewise, bureaucracy does not demystify our world—on the contrary it may make us feel more helpless and confused in the face of powers beyond our control. When confronted with large and complex bureaucracies, modern people may not feel any

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more in control of the world around them than a South Pacific Islander confronted with the prospect of deep-sea fishing for shark. Modern people still turn to religion in part because certain experiences—anthropologist Clifford Geertz emphasizes bafflement, pain and moral dilemmas—remain part of the human condition.

That condition cannot, however, completely explain the persistence of religious belief. It is clearly possible to respond in nonreligious ways to these universal human experiences, and many people do, suggesting that religiosity is a feature of some responses to these experiences, not an automatic consequence of the experiences themselves. From this perspective, attempting to explain religion's persistence by the persistence of bafflement, pain and moral paradox sidesteps a key question: Why do so many people continue to respond to these experiences by turning to religion?

Another, more sociological explanation of the persistence of religious belief emphasizes the fact that religion—like language and ethnicity—is one of the main ways of delineating group boundaries and collective identities. As long as who we are and how we differ from others remains a salient organizing principle for social movements and institutions, religion can be expected to thrive. Indeed, this identity-marking aspect of religion may also explain why religious belief often seems more broad than deep. If affirming that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God serves in part to identify oneself as part of the community of Bible-believing Christians, it is not so important to know in much detail what the Bible actually says.

The modern world is not inherently inhospitable to religious belief, and many kinds of belief have not declined at all over the past several decades. Certain aspects of modernity, however, do seem to reduce levels of religious observance. In a recent study of 65 countries, Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker find that people in industrialized and wealthy nations are typically less religious than others. That said, among advanced industrial democracies the United States still stands out for its relatively high level of religious belief. When asked to rate the importance of God in their lives on a scale of 1 to 10, 50 percent of Americans say “10,” far higher than the 28 percent in Canada, 26 percent in Spain, 21 percent in Australia, 16 percent in Great Britain and Germany and 10 percent in France. Among advanced industrial democracies, only Ireland, at 40 percent, approaches the U.S. level of religious conviction.

## RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION

Cross-national comparisons also show that Americans participate in organized religion more often than do people in other affluent nations. In the United States, 55 percent of those who are asked say they attend religious services at least once a month, compared with 40 percent in Canada, 38 percent in Spain, 25 percent in Australia, Great Britain and West Germany, and 17 percent in France.

The trends over time, however, are murkier. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have argued that religious participation has increased over the course of American history. This claim is based mainly on increasing rates of church membership. In 1789 only 10 percent of Americans belonged to churches, with church membership rising to 22 percent in 1890 and reaching 50 to 60 percent in the 1950s. Today, about two-thirds of Americans say they are members of a church or a synagogue. These rising figures should not, however, be taken at face value, because churches have become less exclusive clubs than they were earlier in our history. Fewer people attend religious services today than claim formal membership in religious congregations, but the opposite was true in earlier times. The long-term trend in religious participation is difficult to discern.

Although we have much more evidence about recent trends in religious participation, it still is difficult to say definitively whether religious-service attendance—the main way Americans participate collectively in religion—has declined or remained stable in recent decades. The available evidence is conflicting. Surveys using the traditional approach of asking people directly about their attendance mainly show stability over time, confirming the consensus that attendance has not declined much.

New evidence, however, points toward decline. Drawing on time-use records, which ask individuals to report everything they do on a given day, Stanley Presser and Linda Stinson find that weekly religious-service attendance has declined over the past 30 years from about 40 percent in 1965 to about 25 percent in 1994. Sandra Hofferth and John Sandberg also find a decline in church attendance reported in children's time-use diaries. Time-use studies mitigate the over-reporting of religious-service attendance that occurs when people are asked directly whether or not they attend. Also, these time-use studies find the same lower attendance rates found by researchers who count the number of people who actually show up at church rather than take them at their word when they say they attend.

Additional evidence of declining activity comes from political scientist Robert Putnam's book on civic engagement in the United States, *Bowling Alone*. Combining survey data from five different sources, Putnam finds some decline in religious participation. Perhaps more important, because of the context they provide, are Putnam's findings about a range of civic and voluntary association activities that are closely related to religious participation. Virtually every type of civic engagement declined in the last third of the 20th century: voting, attending political, public and club meetings, serving as officer or committee member in local clubs and organizations, belonging to national organizations, belonging to unions, playing sports and working on community projects. If religious participation has indeed remained constant, it would be virtually the only type of civic engagement that has not declined in recent decades. Nor did the events of September 11, 2001 alter attendance patterns. If there was a spike in religious service attendance immediately following September 11, it was short-lived.

Overall, the following picture emerges from recent research: Since the 1960s, Americans have engaged less frequently in religious activities, but they have continued to believe just as much in the supernatural and to be just as interested in spirituality. This pattern characterizes many other countries around the world as well. Inglehart and Baker's data suggest that American trends are similar to those in other advanced industrialized societies: declining religious activities, stability in religious belief and increasing interest in the meaning and purpose of life.

Important differences among subgroups remain nonetheless. Blacks are more religiously active than whites, and women are more active than men. There is little reason to think, however, that the recent declines in participation vary among subgroups.

New forms of religious participation are not replacing attendance at weekend worship services. When churchgoers are asked what day they attended a service, only 3 percent mention a day other than Sunday. Perhaps more telling, when those who say they did not attend a religious service in the past week are asked if they participated in some other type of religious event or meeting, such as a prayer or Bible study group, only 2 percent say yes (although 21 percent of non-attendees say they watched religious television or listened to religious radio). The vast majority of religious activity in the United States takes place at weekend religious serv-

ices. If other forms of religious activity have increased, they have not displaced traditional weekend attendance.

Overall, the current knowledge of individual piety in the United States does not conform to expectations that modernity is fundamentally hostile to religion. Many conventional religious beliefs remain popular, showing no sign of decline. That said, research on individual piety neither points to stability on every dimension nor implies that social changes associated with modernity leave religious belief and practice unimpaired. The evidence supports neither a simple version of secularization nor a wholesale rejection of secularization. Moreover, focusing on levels of religious piety diverts attention from what may be more important: the social significance of religion.

## RELIGIOUS PIETY IN CONTEXT

Focusing exclusively on levels of religious belief and practice overlooks something crucial about religion's social significance. Consider, for example, the difference between two charismatic worship services, complete with speaking in tongues, one occurring outside a village in colonial central Africa early in the 20th century and the other occurring in an urban Pentecostal church on a Sunday morning in the contemporary United States. In the first case, described by anthropologist Karen Fields, charismatic religion—simply by encouraging baptism and speaking in tongues—challenged the traditional religious authority on which colonial rule was based; the American service plays no such political role. Similarly, consider the difference between two “new age” religious groups, both of which encourage certain kinds of physical exercise to achieve spiritual peace and growth, with one group meeting in a YMCA somewhere in New York City and the other meeting in a park somewhere in Beijing. In the two examples, the same religious action takes on dramatically different meanings that can lead to very different consequences depending on the institutional and political context. In some times and places, speaking in tongues or seeking health by stretching one's limbs shakes social institutions and provokes hostile reactions. In other times and places, such displays shake nothing but the bodies of the faithful, provoking little hostility or, indeed, any other reaction. The social significance of religious piety—its capacity to mean something beyond itself—depends on the context in which it occurs.

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From this perspective, we can wonder how high levels of belief and practice are relevant to understanding the social importance of religion. Where people are interested in the spiritual and the supernatural, both traditional religions and new religious movements try to capture that interest. Some successfully bring people into the fold, energize members' beliefs and activities and build impressive organizations. But even a wildly successful religious movement does not expand religion's dominion if its success is limited to influencing how people spend an hour or two a week of their leisure time in a society where such activity only occasionally reverberates beyond the walls of the church. Increases in charismatic religion in the United States, for example, may be interesting to chart, but when religious institutions do not generally shape other important social institutions, like government or the market, such increases lack the consequences they have where speaking in tongues challenges a village leader's authority. The same can be said of ebbs and flows of any religious style.

Of course, when many people are religiously active, religion can have more social influence. A society like the United States, with more than 300,000 religious congregations, presents opportunities for political mobilization that do not exist in societies where religion is a less prominent part of society. Witness the Civil Rights movement, the Religious Right and other causes that mix religion and politics. Nonetheless, religion in the United States, as in most other advanced societies, is organizationally separate from (even if occasionally overlapping) government, the economy and other parts of civil society. This limits a religion's capacity to change the world, even if it converts millions.

The social significance of religious belief and participation depends on the institutional settings in which they occur. This is why the religious movements of our day with the greatest potential for increasing religion's influence are not those that simply seek new converts or spur belief and practice, no matter how successful they may be. The movements with the greatest such potential are those that seek to expand religion's authority or influence in other domains. In some parts of the

contemporary world, this has meant religious leaders seeking and sometimes achieving the power to veto legislation, dictate university curricula, exclude girls from schooling and women from working in certain jobs and determine the kinds of art or literature offered to the public. In the United States, the most significant contemporary movement to expand religious influence probably is the effort to shape school curricula concerning evolution and creationism. Wherever they occur, when such movements succeed they change the meaning and significance of religious piety. Efforts like these reflect and shape the abiding role of religion in a society in ways that go beyond the percentages of people who believe in God, pray, or attend religious services.

### Recommended Resources

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