Most religious groups in USA have lost ground, survey finds

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY
When it comes to religion, the USA is now land of the freelancers.

The percentage. of people who call themselves in some way Christian has dropped more than 11% in a generation. The faithful have scattered out of their traditional bases: The Bible Belt is less Baptist. The Rust Belt is less Catholic. And everywhere, more people are exploring spiritual frontiers — or falling off the faith map completely.

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These dramatic shifts in just 18 years are detailed in the new American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), to be released today. It finds that, despite growth and immigration that has added nearly 50 million adults to the U.S. population, almost all religious denominations have lost ground since the first ARIS survey in 1990.

"More than ever before, people are just making up their own stories of who they are. They say, 'I'm everything. I'm nothing. I believe in myself,' " says Barry Kosmin, survey co-author.

Among the key findings in the 2008 survey:

• So many Americans claim no religion at all (15%, up from 8% in 1990), that this category now outranks every other major U.S. religious group except Catholics and Baptists. In a nation that has long been mostly Christian, "the challenge to Christianity … does not come from other religions but from a rejection of all forms of organized religion," the report concludes.

• Catholic strongholds in New England and the Midwest have faded as immigrants, retirees and young job-seekers have moved to the Sun Belt. While bishops from the Midwest to Massachusetts close down or consolidate historic parishes, those in the South are scrambling to serve increasing numbers of worshipers.

• Baptists, 15.8% of those surveyed, are down from 19.3% in 1990. Mainline Protestant denominations, once socially dominant, have seen sharp declines: The percentage of Methodists, for example, dropped from 8% to 5%.

• The percentage of those who choose a generic label, calling themselves simply Christian, Protestant, non-denominational, evangelical or "born again," was 14.2%, about the same as in 1990.

• Jewish numbers showed a steady decline, from 1.8% in 1990 to 1.2% today. The percentage of Muslims, while still slim, has doubled, from 0.3% to 0.6%. Analysts within both groups suggest those numbers understate the groups' populations.

Ihsan Bagby, associate professor of Islamic studies at the University of Kentucky-Lexington, says that most national telephone surveys such as ARIS undercount Muslims, and that he is conducting a study of mosques' membership sponsored by the Hartford (Conn.) Institute for Religious Research.

Meanwhile, some Jewish surveys that report larger numbers of Jews also include "cultural" Jews — those who connect to Judiasm through its traditions, but not necessarily through actively practicing the religion.

Meanwhile, nearly 2.8 million people now identify with dozens of new religious movements, calling themselves Wiccan, pagan or "Spiritualist," which the survey does not define.

Wicca, a contemporary form of paganism that includes goddess worship and reverence for nature, has even made its way to Arlington National Cemetery, where the Pentagon now allows Wiccans' five-pointed-star symbol to be used on veterans' gravestones.

Religion as a hobby

Since the first ARIS study was released, other major national surveys have offered snapshots of the USA's faith.

The Baylor University Religion Surveys in 2006 and 2008, each based on 35,000 interviews, were distinguished by a look at how people

described and understood God. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released its Religious Landscape Survey last year, also based on 35,000 interviews, mapping Americans' beliefs state by state. It found that 41% of people had switched their religion at some point in life.

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The initial ARIS report in 1990 set the table for those surveys.

It was based on 113,000 interviews, updated with 50,000 more in 2001 and now 54,000 in 2008. Because the U.S. Census does not ask about religion, the ARIS survey was the first comprehensive study of how people identify their spiritual expression.

Kosmin concluded from the 1990 data that many saw God as a "personal hobby," and that the USA is "a greenhouse for spiritual sprouts."

Today, he says, "religion has become more like a fashion statement, not a deep personal commitment for many."

Kosmin is now director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.; ARIS co-researcher Ariela Keysar is associate director.

The ARIS research also led in quantifying and planting a label on the "Nones" — people who said "None" when asked the survey's basic question: "What is your religious identity?"

The survey itself may have contributed to a higher rate of reporting as sociologists began analyzing the newly identified Nones. "The Nones may have felt more free to step forward, less looked upon as outcasts" after the ARIS results were published, Keysar says.

Oregon once led the nation in Nones (18% in 1990), but in 2008 the leader, with 34%, was Vermont, where Nones significantly outnumber every other group.

Meabh Fitzpatrick, 49, of Rutland, Vt., says she is upfront about becoming an atheist 10 years ago because "it's important for us to be counted. I'm a taxpayer and a law-abiding citizen and an ethical person, and I don't think people assume this about atheists."

Not all Nones have made such a philosophical choice; most just unhook from religious ties.

Diane Mueller, 43, of Austin, who grew up Methodist, says she's simply "totally disengaged from the church and the Bible, too." Sunday mornings for her family mean playing in a park, not praying in a pew.

Ex-Catholic Dylan Rossi, 21, a philosophy student in Boston and a Massachusetts native, is part of the sharp fall in the state's percentage of Catholics — from 54% to 39% in his lifetime.

Rossi says he's typical among his friends: "If religion comes up, everyone at the table will start mocking it. I don't know anyone religious and hardly anyone 'spiritual.' "

Social mobility a factor

Anger and dismay over the clergy sexual abuse scandal, which erupted in Boston in 2002, may be reflected in declining rates of Catholics across New England. But the total percentage of Catholics in the USA declined only slightly from 1990 to 2008, from 26.2% to 25.1%. Analysts say immigration and other demographic shifts account for most of the changes.

"It's not that everyone in New England lost their Catholic faith since 1990. It's not the same people in New England," says sociologist Mary Gautier, senior researcher at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the research arm of the Catholic Church in America.

Membership in New England's Catholic churches is shrinking as older Catholics have died or moved to sunnier climates. Young adults are choosing non-Catholic partners, having civil weddings and skipping baptism for their babies. And those moving in to areas served by the churches are young adults who often find their communities of work and friendship online, not in parish halls.

"I sometimes wish I had a sky hook to take people from dying parishes up North and plunk them down in the parishes around Austin or Atlanta — and bring their beautiful buildings with them," Gautier says.

Bishop Gregory Aymond would be happy to have those resources in Austin. He's spiritually delighted and financially challenged as his Texas diocese has doubled in numbers with retirees, Mexican immigrants, students at five major universities and Californians moving in for high-tech jobs.

"And demographers expect it to double again in the next 10 to 12 years," he says.

In Mount Pleasant, S.C., a suburb of Charleston, "everyone from Ohio is here," says Msgr. James Carter, pastor of Christ Our King Catholic Church. The church has grown so big so fast that it has spun off another parish and a mission church, and it plans outdoor split-shift services for Easter to accommodate about 2,500 families.

South Carolina also exemplifies the Protestant faiths' shrinking share of the national religion "pie." The state has more Catholics (10%, up from 6% in 1990) and the percentage of Nones has more than tripled, from 3% to 10%. The share of Protestants is 73%, down from 88% in 1990.

Like Gautier, the Rev. Kendall Harmon, theologian for the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina, blames social mobility.

"Mobility means your ideas are more challenged and your family and childhood traditions have less influence, particularly if you are not strongly rooted in them. I see kids today who have no vocabulary of faith, and neither do many of their parents."

Harmon recalls, "A couple came into my office once with a yellow pad of their teenage son's questions. One of them was: 'What is that guy doing hanging up there on the plus sign?' "

Kosmin and Keysar also found a "piety gap" in how Americans understand God: While 69% say they believe in a personal God, the Judeo-Christian understanding of the Almighty, an additional 30% made no such connection.

The piety gap defines the primary sides in the culture wars, Kosmin says.

"It's about gay marriage and abortion and stem cells and the family. If a personal God says, 'Thou shalt not' or 'Thou shalt' see these a certain way, you'd take it very seriously. Meanwhile, three in 10 people aren't listening to that God," he says.

"There's more clarity at the two extremes and the mishmash is in the middle," Keysar adds.

Mark Silk, director of the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College, sees in the numbers "an emergence of a soft evangelicalism — E-lite — that owes a lot to evangelical styles of worship and basic approach to church.

"But E-lite is more a matter of aesthetic and style and a considerable softening of the edges in doctrine, politics and social values," Silk says.

Additional narrowly focused surveys, with closer looks at Catholics, evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and African-American Christians, will be released later this year by Trinity's Program on Public Values, which sponsored ARIS, Silk says.

Some believers might be alarmed by the ARIS findings, but Tom Haynes isn't. Haynes, 46, a Houston entrepreneur, is the brother of Diane Mueller, the Austin mom who claims no religion. Same Methodist upbringing. Totally different spiritual choices.

Haynes, like 69% of Americans, said in the ARIS survey that he believes there is "definitely a personal God." He calls himself a deeply committed "follower of Christ," rather than aligning with a specific denomination. He attends a non-denominational community church where he likes the rock music, but bible study is the focus of his faith.

"We just look to Jesus," he says. "That's why I don't pay attention to surveys. Christianity is moving totally under the radar. It's the work of God. It can't be measured. It happens inside of people's souls."