

# Americans' fundamental beliefs changing

## Sharmila Devi, Foreign Correspondent

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Charmer Wren, left, and Joel Guttormson run the atheist society at Denver's Metropolitan State College. Kevin Moloney for The National

NEW YORK // Robert considers himself an evangelical Christian, though not of the fire and brimstone variety, and he often takes a liberal stance on social issues, unlike his right-wing co-religionists.

Rather than attend a "megachurch" where charismatic preachers can attract thousands of worshippers, he drives 45 minutes outside of Washington to attend a smaller church that he says better fits his spiritual needs.

"This church is very community-orientated and the preacher gives thought-provoking sermons. I like to be challenged," said Robert, who requested anonymity because he works for a government agency. "Many of the other churches nearby are too politicised, either on the left or right, and don't offer enough of a spiritual home."

Robert's aversion to political Christianity appears to be shared by a growing number of US residents. Recent polls and research show stalled growth in the popularity of the conservative or fundamentalist strain of evangelicalism, which has been broadly defined as belief in a personal conversion to living by the New Testament, or being "[born again](#)". George W Bush, the former president, is one of the best-known adherents to the faith, a hallmark of his presidency.

Church attendance research by *Outreach* magazine, which calls itself "a leading provider of church communication and outreach tools", found numbers at some of biggest churches in the US shrinking and many worshippers failing to move beyond the "beginner believer" stage.

While the sands appear to be shifting within US Christianity, overall, the religion has declined. Since 1990, the number of US residents who are Christian has slipped to 76 per cent from 86 per cent, according to a recent American Religious Identification Survey by Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Those who said they had no religious faith almost doubled to 15 per cent.

"Within two generations, evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half its occupants," warned Michael Spencer, a prominent blogger and Southern Baptist, in a commentary published in the Christian Science Monitor newspaper that caused quite a controversy among Christians.

He firmly blamed the imminent "collapse" on evangelicals themselves for having aligned themselves too much with Republican conservatism against liberals in the "culture wars" on such issues as abortion and homosexuality. He said more of the public saw the movement as a threat to cultural progress and bad for the country.

"We fell into the trap of believing in a cause more than a faith," he wrote. Evangelical leaders "made buildings, numbers and paid staff its drugs for half a century". Meanwhile, young people knew little about the tenets of their belief except how they felt about it.

"Evangelicalism is a vital movement not only of beliefs, but also personal experience, even if it is embarrassing," said Mr Spencer by telephone from his home in rural Kentucky. "Small groups are the core of our movement, but we threw that out and got celebrity preachers and now we're paying the bill in a decline."

Barack Obama, the president, has made fewer public displays of his mainline Protestant Christianity than his predecessor. But some liberals were outraged by his choice of Pastor Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at his inauguration because of the evangelical leader's opposition to gay marriage and abortion.

Others noted that Mr Warren's style was not to condemn "sinners to hell" but rather to adopt a more inclusionary approach, which has encompassed such issues as poverty, global warming and Aids that were previously seen as liberal preoccupations. His non-denominational Saddleback Church, in southern California, is one of the fastest-growing in the United States.

Meanwhile, some Christian theologians have decried the "prosperity gospel" of other evangelical leaders or "pastorpreneurs", whose approach to the religion is akin to using a self-help manual to realise the American dream of wealth and prosperity, a far cry from the life of Jesus, who espoused poverty and humility.

"Society has become more pluralistic since 1965 and in another 20 years time, the prosperity gospel will be seen as an aberration," said Randall Balmer, a religious history professor at Columbia University in New York and an Episcopal priest. "There are big changes afoot and the religious right is reeling right now. Fraudulent Christians distorted the words of Jesus and the New Testament. A decline would be a good thing and force us all to re-evaluate."

Many Christians dismissed as alarmist a *Newsweek* magazine cover story last month headlined "The End of Christian America". Even the author said the United States was unlikely to become a "post-religious" society, but remain an "ever-fluid mix" of secularism and religion.

Mr Spencer said he could see the percentage of US Christians declining to 40 per cent but not below that. "If you look at the situation worldwide, then the next chapter in Christianity will come from the global south and charismatic churches will do well."

One of the fastest-growing Christian movements is Pentecostalism, which emphasises personal experience of God through baptism. Many of its newest, and most popular, leaders in the United States have come from Africa.

Mr Spencer said he would remain a Southern Baptist rather than switch to another church because such "consumerism" was not for him. "I want to stick around and make a positive contribution," he said. "We need to go back to our core content and engage with the culture but not have culture wars. Good activists often make terrible Christians."

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