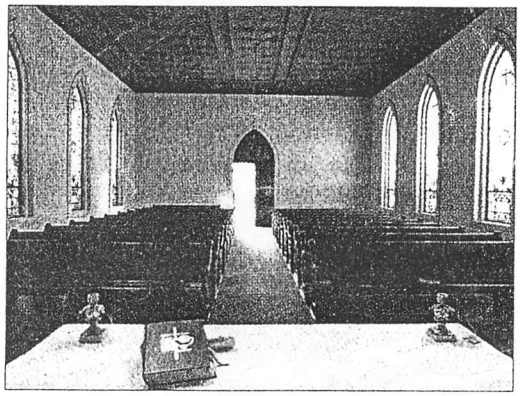
Losing our religion

The ranks of the nation's religiously unaffiliated—so-called Nones—are growing rapidly. Is organized religion fading?

Who are the 'Nones'?

Your neighbors. A new study by researchers at Trinity College found that 34 million adult Americans—about 15 percent of the population—have no religious affiliation. In 1990, just 8 percent of the population claimed no affiliation with a religious denomination. In terms of education, income, and marital status, Nones are similar to the general population, though they are more likely to live in the Northeast or Pacific Northwest. In Vermont, they actually make up the largest single "denomination." Nones are, on average, younger than the general population—a factor helping to make them the fastest-growing segment of the religious landscape. "Nones are not a fringe group anymore, and are now part of Middle America," says study co-author Barry Kosmin. "They're present in every socio-demographic group." Says Jesse Galef of the Secular Coalition of America: "We are part of the community. We are like everybody else."



Where is everyone?

But what do they believe?

A slim majority of Nones believe in God and a third say they pray weekly or daily. Fewer than 10 percent call themselves atheists—although the number of atheists and agnostics in the U.S. has increased from 1 million in 1990 to 3.6 million today. "I do believe in something," says Matthew Ashner, a 31-year-old agnostic from Connecticut, but not in a "man in the clouds" or the "wacky stories" of the Bible. As researcher Kosmin describes it, most do not fit the stereotype of the "New Age searcher," but are "skeptical about organized religion and clerics while still holding to the idea of God."

Why are their numbers rising?

For lots of different reasons. Some have apparently abandoned organized religion as a result of specific experiences. One-third of the unaffiliated have Irish ancestry, compared with only 10 percent of the general population, suggesting that disenchantment with the Catholic Church—and its sex-abuse scandals—is a contributing factor. Some nonreligious Americans may simply be retreating from an arena that has been a harsh political battleground in recent decades, with fights over abortion, gay rights, school prayer, and evolution. And some major denominations, including Episcopalians and Southern Baptists, have experienced bruising internecine fights over doctrine. There may also be a more profound cause. A recent national poll found that the proportion of Americans who believe that religion can "answer all or most of today's problems" has fallen to 48 percent—an all-time low. Many believers, says religion writer Julia Duin, "are perplexed and disappointed with God."

Churchless but not faithless

Not everyone leaving organized religion is a None. In fact, some refugees are doubling down on their faith even as they turn their backs on the church. The "house church" movement is a reaction to what some Christians view as the institutionalization of faith. Participants meet in small groups in living rooms and dens, worshiping together, sharing meals, and discussing the Gospels. Simplicity and purity are the goal, with co-religionists seeking to recapture the spirit of early Christians, before layers of church ritual and bureaucracy developed. "I felt immediately at home," says Jacqueline Colledge, who joined a house church in Utah after reading a book about the early decades of Christianity. As Christian pollster and author George Barna explains, "These people are less interested in attending church, than in *being* the church."

Where does that leave churches?

A lot less crowded. Statistics on churchgoing are notoriously unreliable, in part because survey respondents tend to inflate their levels of devotion. But the respected National Opinion Research Center says that regular church, synagogue, and mosque attendance fell from 41 percent of the U.S. population in 1971 to 31 percent in 2002. Nearly every major denomination has lost ground, with mainstream Protestant churches seeing their rolls decline by 20 percent or more in recent years. Even evangelical mega-churches, the religious growth story of recent years, appear to be maxing out. At the same time, denominational loyalty has eroded, as churchgoers "shop" for new congregations they hope will better suit their values and tastes. "There's no simple answer why people are so restless," says researcher Brad Waggoner of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Can religion recover?

Probably. Organized religion has been said to be down to its last "dying gasp" for centuries. Describing Colonial Boston, evangelical George Whitefield lamented that religion there had "lost much of its powers." More than a century later, orator Robert Ingersoll observed that "churches are dying out all over the land." *Time* magazine famously asked "Is God dead?" on a 1966 cover, and in April of this year, *Newsweek* announced "The End of Christian America." But Protestant congregations alone number more than 300,000 in the U.S., and just a few years ago some scholars were suggesting that Christian religious fervor had reached such a peak that America might be on the verge of another "Great Awakening." Even the Trinity study found that most Americans raised in nonreligious homes ultimately join a religious community.

So what's at stake?

The character of the nation. With the number of religious refugees doubling in less than a generation, a continuation of that trend could markedly change the cultural and political landscape. "If current trends continue and cohorts of nonreligious young people replace older religious people," the Trinity study states, "the likely outcome is that in two decades, the Nones could account for around one-quarter of the American population." Nonreligious citizens tend to hold more liberal political and cultural views than regular churchgoers, suggesting that a continued decline in religious affiliation could be accompanied by a rise of liberalism. Secularism in the U.S., says Trinity demographer Ariela Keysar, might one day even rival the famed religious indifference of Europeans. "We're not there," she says, "but we're going in that direction."

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