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Introduction

By world standards, the United States is a highly religious country. Nine out of ten Americans say they believe in God, half say they pray every day, and a fifth say they attend religious services every week. Some skepticism is appropriate here. It is not always clear what people mean when they say they believe in God or pray, and many people believe in a God that is quite untraditional. Moreover, people do not really go to church as often as they tell pollsters that they do. But even when we take all of this into account, Americans still are more pious than people in any other wealthy country.¹

We cannot say anything definitive about very long-term trends in US religious beliefs and practices because high-quality national surveys do not exist before the middle of the twentieth century. Still, historical studies of local communities suggest that today's relatively high levels of religiosity have characterized American society from its beginnings. Brooks Holifield, a prominent historian of American religion, put it this way in 1994: "For most of the past three hundred years, from

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35 to 40 percent of the population has probably participated in congregations with some degree of regularity.”² The weekly religious service attendance rate implied by the best national survey in 2024 is not much below that range: 30 percent. This overstates true weekly attendance because people say that they attend services more frequently than they really do, but it probably represents fairly the proportion of Americans who participate in congregations more or less regularly. The continuity is striking.

It is tempting to treat any signs of change as mere footnotes to the main story of continuing high levels of American religiosity. But American religion has changed over the last fifty years, and it is important to clarify what is changing and what is staying the same. As we will see, recent religious trends mainly are slow-moving—even glacial. But slow-moving does not mean unimportant, and long-term, slow social change still can be profound social change. We should not overstate change, but we also should not overlook the real change that has occurred and is occurring. I will try to strike the right balance between the twin dangers of overstating and understating recent changes in American religion.

Some of the trends I highlight in this book are widely known. Others are not. This book documents even the well-known trends in order to provide a stand-alone summary of important religious change in the United States.³ I seek to summarize the big picture changes in American religion since 1972. I mainly will describe rather than explain, and I will focus on aggregate national change as opposed to differences among subgroups. I do not try to document all the interesting differences between, say, men and women, Blacks and whites, Christians and Jews, Northerners and Southerners, liberals and conservatives, or other subgroups of US residents. I offer no

overarching theory or major reinterpretation. I occasionally will comment on variations across subgroups of Americans, but only in instances where knowing about such differences is important to understanding the aggregate picture. I occasionally will mention explanations of the trends, but only when a straightforward and well-established explanation exists. This book is for those who do not know, but who want to know, in broad brush, what is changing and what is not in American religion. Those who want to dig deeper can follow the notes to additional reading. My goal is to provide key facts so those who wish to discuss, explain, or debate the state of American religion over the past fifty years can do so knowledgeably.

I keep this book descriptive and aggregate because I want to keep it short. I want to keep it short because I believe this sort of factual summary should be easily accessible to students and the general public. Too often, we develop explanations and interpretations before we are clear about what the facts are. Too often, people interested in basic facts about American religion have to search harder than they should to find an overview they can trust. Too frequently, teachers who want their students to learn basic facts about American religious change cannot find a source that is inexpensive and short enough to assign in class. I wanted to keep this book short so that it can inform the maximum number of people about what's changing and what's not in American religion. For the same reason, I have erred on the side of including less rather than more methodological detail.

The trends I highlight are not the only important ones in American religion, but they are the best documented. "Best documented" is a crucial qualifier. I will draw primarily on the two best sources of information about these trends. One is the General Social Survey (GSS), a survey of the American adult population that has been conducted since 1972 by NORC at the

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University of Chicago. It is by far the best source of available information about continuity and change in Americans' religiosity over the past five decades. Of course, no survey is perfect. The GSS's primary limitation is that, while richly informative, it has not asked people about every religious belief, attitude, or practice we might like to know about. But no other high-quality source contains as much information about American religion over as many years, so describing the best-documented trends means relying primarily on the GSS.⁴

Examining trends over the most recent few years is complicated by the fact that the GSS made a major methodological change after its 2018 survey. Until then, the GSS gathered data by interviewing respondents, mainly in person and sometimes on the telephone. The 2021 GSS, by contrast, gathered data almost entirely by using an online, self-administered survey. The 2022 and 2024 surveys implemented a mixed strategy, interviewing about half the respondents, while the other half completed the survey themselves online. This change is especially important for studying religion trends because interviews tend to produce higher rates of religious belief and practice than do self-administered surveys, in part because people are less likely to exaggerate their religiosity in a self-administered survey, but also because religious people may be less likely to participate in online surveys than in interviews.⁵

This methodological shift requires extra caution when interpreting religious trends in the GSS after 2018. Even dropping the 2021 GSS altogether, which I do throughout the book, readers will see that the typical pattern in the data is unusually steep declines in religiosity after 2018. This steep post-2018 decline may be true decline, caused perhaps by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also is possible that the recent steep decline is at least partly an artifact of the post-2018 methodological change

in the GSS, which led to about half the sample completing the survey online.

My view is that, since 2018, religiosity in the United States has continued the slow decline evident in the years before that, though that decline probably is not as steep in the most recent years as the GSS data indicate. I say this for three primary reasons. First, while religious decline looks unusually steep after 2018 for most indicators, the post-2018 picture is not qualitatively different from what we would expect if the trends evident over the previous fifty years continued apace. Second, there is little reason to think that the underlying forces producing slowly declining religiosity over the last fifty years, especially the relentless replacement of older, more religious cohorts by younger, less religious ones, have stopped operating. And third, results from data sources other than the GSS, such as Gallup, Pew, and the American Time Use Study (ATUS), are consistent with ongoing slow decline. I will say more about these considerations along the way. The bottom line, however, is that the most reasonable conclusion is that while the most recent GSS data may somewhat exaggerate the pace of recent declines in religious belief and practice, and while it is possible that there has been a lull in that decline since 2020, it seems unlikely that these data mislead about the fact of ongoing slow decline. We will have to wait for more years of data to draw firmer conclusions about the exact nature of American religious trends in the years immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, although the evidence to date strongly suggests that, except for a large increase in the percentage of congregations that now livestream their worship services, the pandemic probably did not permanently alter individual or collective religious practice.⁶

Related to the possibility that the pace of religious decline since 2018 may be exaggerated by GSS methodological changes,

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specific levels of religious belief and practice in the most recent GSS surveys may somewhat understate the true extent of those beliefs and practices in the population. For the reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph, if the GSS underestimates religiosity levels in the most recent years, it probably is not by more than a few percentage points. Still, readers should keep this potential underestimation in mind.

A final thought on this subject: The most hermeneutically conservative readers might focus on the trends only until 2018. As slow decline is clearly evident to that point, such readers might then ask themselves if it seems likely that the post-2018 results were produced by a world in which that decline stopped in its tracks in 2018. For the reasons I have described, I think the answer to this question is “no,” so I will use the 2022 and 2024 data, interpreting them cautiously.

The other primary source I will use heavily is the National Congregations Study (NCS), a national survey of local religious congregations from across the religious spectrum. The NCS surveys, which I directed, were conducted in 1998, 2006–7, 2012, and 2018–19 in collaboration with NORC at the University of Chicago. These congregation surveys do not go as far back in time as the GSS, but they offer the best information we have about congregational change since 1998.⁷

There is judgment involved in deciding what counts as stability and what counts as change. Does the seven-point difference between, say, the 54 percent of people who said in 1983 that they prayed at least daily and the 47 percent who said so in 2024 represent a small decline or stability—especially considering the point in the previous paragraph that the 2024 number may understate the true percentage? Does the five-point difference between the 76 percent of people who said in 1973 that

they believe in life after death and the 81 percent who said so in 2024 represent stability or a small increase?⁸

Statistical significance is not enough of a guide when judging what counts as stability and what counts as change, since even trivial differences can be statistically significant if the samples are large enough. Generally, I will call something a trend only if change in one direction is evident over several survey years, several similar items trend in the same direction, or there is corroborating evidence from other sources. Even a relatively large percentage-point difference on an isolated item measured at just two or three points in time is too flimsy a basis for declaring a trend, so when I have only two or three data points, the other criteria for judging something a real change—several similar items trending in the same direction and independent corroboration of the shift—take on greater weight.

This book focuses on change, but not everything is changing. In 2024, 81 percent of Americans said that they believed in life after death and 38 percent reported having had a “born-again” experience. In 2018, when the GSS last asked about beliefs in heaven, hell, and miracles, and Bible reading, large majorities said they definitely or probably believed in heaven (81 percent), hell (71 percent), and miracles (75 percent). None of these numbers has changed much since the GSS first asked these questions in the 1980s or 1990s. Bible reading also has not changed much in recent decades, with 57 percent saying in 2018 that they had read a religious text outside a worship service in the last year, similar to the 60 percent who said that in 1988 about reading the Bible.

These continuities, and the overall high levels of religious belief and practice in the United States, reinforce the

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observation that by world standards Americans remain remarkably religious in both belief and practice. The trends I describe in the pages that follow should be seen against the backdrop of these continuing high levels of religiosity. This stability should make us reluctant to overstate the amount of change in American religion and skeptical when we hear that American religion is shifting dramatically or suddenly. But this background continuity also makes the changes that are occurring stand out more than they otherwise might.

Timescale also is important when assessing continuity and change. Some religious beliefs and practices that look essentially stable even over a decade or two show signs of change if we take a longer view. Consider, for example, belief in God. In 2024, 86 percent of people said they believe in God or a higher power. This percentage has changed over the years, but slowly—so slowly that it would be easy to miss if we looked only over ten or even twenty years. But now that the GSS has asked about this for thirty-six years—starting in 1988, when 95 percent said they believed in God—the change is evident. Taking an even longer view makes the change even clearer. In the 1950s, 99 percent of Americans said they believed in God—a number that has dropped slowly yet steadily since then. This is a slow decline that is stretched out over seven decades, and after seven decades, nearly nine in ten Americans still say they believe in God or a higher power. The change is slow, but it is real.⁹

This example illustrates that my interpretive strategy and my focus on the years since 1972 make me more likely to understate than overstate change. This example also foreshadows a major summary conclusion: Even in the midst of substantial continuity in American religion, there are clear signs of decline.

In this book, I describe American religious trends under seven headings: diversity, belief, involvement, congregations, leaders, liberal Protestant decline, and polarization. Chapter 2 documents America's increasing religious diversity, including the increasing number of people with no religious affiliation. As we will see, it is not just the country as a whole that is more religiously diverse. Our families and friendship circles also are more religiously diverse than they were several decades ago, and this probably is why increasing religious diversity has been accompanied by a cultural change in the direction of greater toleration of and even appreciation for religions other than our own.

Chapter 3 is about religious belief. The belief in God declined over this period, as has the percentage of people expressing that belief with great confidence. Believing that the Bible is the literal word of God has declined too. In this chapter, I document that spirituality often is expressed in a diffuse way that is distinct from traditional religion, most obviously in the growing percentage of people who say that they are spiritual but not religious. I explain why more diffuse spirituality should not be understood as a counterforce to religious decline.

Chapter 4 focuses on religious involvement, which mainly means attendance at weekend worship services. It is more difficult than one might think to nail down the trend in worship attendance, not least because Americans systematically overstate how frequently they attend religious services. But we can see clearly enough to conclude that religious involvement has declined. Data that until relatively recently could be read as indicating stability in religious involvement now unambiguously signal slow decline. It is not that the data have changed. It is that we now have accumulated enough data over a long

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enough time span to discern the signal of slow decline amid the noise of yearly fluctuations.

Furthermore, I show in chapter 4 that the decline in religious belief and practice documented in chapters 3 and 4 are *not* a matter of a collapsing middle, with the ranks of both the most secular and most religious growing. The ranks of the most secular are indeed growing, but the ranks of the most religious are not. The size of the most religious population may be declining more slowly than the decline evident for the religious population as a whole, but it *is* declining.

Because attending worship services remains the most common form of religious involvement, local congregations—churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples—remain the most central kind of religious organization in American society. In chapter 5, I document seven trends in congregational life: declining size, looser connections between congregations and denominations, more informal worship, greater use of information technology, older congregants, more acceptance of gay and lesbian members—and, in some groups, of gay and lesbian leaders—and perhaps most important, more people concentrated in very large churches. Taken together, these trends demonstrate that congregations are shaped by the same cultural, social, and economic pressures affecting American life and institutions more generally.

Chapter 6, coauthored with Anna Holleman, documents several crucial trends concerning religious leaders. Religious leadership is a less attractive career choice for young people than it used to be, and the numbers of older clergy and female clergy are higher than they were several decades ago. Public confidence in religious leaders also has declined precipitously. Public confidence in other kinds of leaders has declined as well, but confidence in religious leaders has declined more than

confidence in leaders of other institutions. Although religious leaders have lost ground on several fronts in recent decades, the vast majority remain satisfied with their lives and work.

More than any other religious group, liberal Protestant denominations have experienced significant, sustained decline over the last fifty years. Chapter 7 is about that decline. This is one of the best-known religious trends of the past fifty years, but it is often misunderstood. Contrary to what many believe, this decline has not occurred because droves of people have been leaving more liberal denominations to join more conservative religious groups. Nor does the decline of liberal denominations mean that liberal religious ideas are waning. Indeed, as a set of ideas, religious liberalism steadily has gained ground in the United States, despite the fate of the denominations most closely associated with it.

Chapter 8 describes another important trend involving religion, liberalism, and conservatism. The now tight connection between conservative Republican politics and white evangelical Protestantism, along with the fact that evangelical Protestants are among the most religiously active people in the country, together mean that actively religious Americans are more politically and socially conservative than less religious ones. Regular churchgoing, moreover, now correlates much more strongly with some types of political and social conservatism than it did fifty years ago. Certain kinds of political and social conservatism have become more tightly linked to religiosity itself. The most and least religiously active people are further apart attitudinally than they were several decades ago.

In this book, I describe many specific trends. There are interesting details, nuances, and complexities, but an essential summary fact about recent religious trends in the United States can be stated simply: *American religiosity has declined*

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over the past fifty years. Believing in life after death may have increased somewhat, yet as we will see in chapter 3, this upturn is better understood as part of the trend toward diffuse spirituality than as an increase in traditional belief. Not every trend I discuss is a story of decline. Increasingly informal worship, for example, is a change that is neither here nor there regarding decline. And there may be specific times and places in the United States where religion looks like it is on the rise, but these should be understood as short-lived local weather patterns within a national religious climate that in some ways is holding its own, although in more ways is slowly declining.

If religiosity is declining in the United States, why do people sometimes think it is holding steady or even increasing? I answer this question in the final chapter, where I also offer several other concluding observations about continuity and change in American religion.

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