

POL 310: Religion and Politics in the U.S.

Lecture 2 - American Religious Landscape

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Plan for Today

1. What is Religion?
2. Secularization Theory
3. America's Religious Landscape

What is religion and how do we study it?

According to sociologist Christian Smith,

“Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad.”

Religion is about

- practices

- derived from beliefs

- about superhuman powers

What is missing here? Religion as a **social identity**.

The Importance of Religion in Political Life

Is religion an important factor in American politics?

Scholars have mostly said no.

Why?

Secularization theory

Proponents of this theory predicted religion would **virtually disappear** and have no influence on public life

Two influential and related theories:

1. Modernization theory
2. Marxist theory

Modernization Brings About Changes That Make Religion Obsolete

Modernization theory argues that the rise of cities, industrialization, technology, education, and bureaucracies reduces the need to rely on beliefs about the supernatural.

- ▶ Moving to a city exposes people to new ideas, lifestyles, and belief systems.
- ▶ Advances in science give humans the ability to better understand/control/adapt to their environment
- ▶ *Modern* institutions care less about people's religious identities, so people begin to identify based on their "standing in the marketplace"¹

¹Wald, Kenneth and Allison Calhoun-Brown. 2018. "A Secular Society?" In *Religion and Politics in the United States 8th Edition*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

The Aftermath of Class Conflict Makes Religion Obsolete

Marxist theory sees religion as an “opiate” that helps the economically oppressed find solace in the face of a grim reality and one that helps those in power ensure their continued dominance.

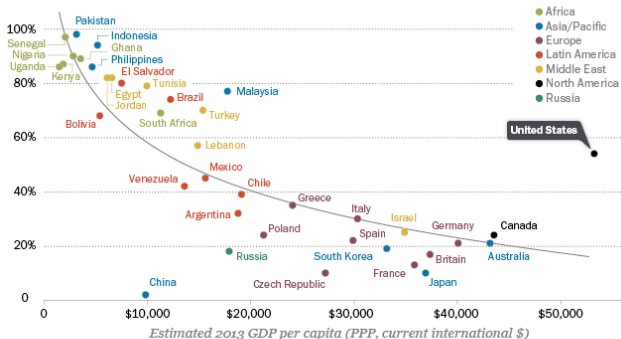
Marx thought the situation was not tenable and that conflict would erupt, resulting in a new order where the old system (that included religion) would be cast aside.²

²Wald, Kenneth and Allison Calhoun-Brown. 2018. “A Secular Society?” In *Religion and Politics in the United States 8th Edition*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

The U.S. Stands Out When Compared to Other Wealthy Nations

Wealthier Nations Tend to Be Less Religious, But U.S. a Prominent Exception

% saying religion plays a very important role in their lives (2011-2013)



Note: The curve represents the logarithmic relationship between GDP per capita and the percentage saying that religion plays a very important role in their lives. Germany, France, Britain % data from spring 2011; U.S., Japan % data from spring 2012. Source: Spring 2011, 2012, 2013 Global Attitudes survey. Data for GDP per capita (PPP) from IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2014.

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Figure 1: Source: PEW (2015)

Religion Seems To Have Thrived Because ...

- ▶ Fits the American idea of self-government
- ▶ Offers an antidote to moral relativism (which itself comes from individualism)
- ▶ Provides an identity and a community for recent immigrants
- ▶ Separation of church and state created a vibrant (unregulated) religious market³

³Wald, Kenneth and Allison Calhoun-Brown. 2018. "A Secular Society?" In *Religion and Politics in the United States 8th Edition*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

However, American Religion Has Not Stayed The Same

Aside from the more absolute claims, one process of secularization is that of **differentiation**, where religion only occupies “its own sphere of competence”

(Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2010, 4).

Differentiation leads to:

1. Privatization of religion
2. Desacralization of natural processes
3. Liberalization of religious doctrine

How does religion in the U.S. exemplify these changes?

The Religious Demographics of This Class

Poll Everywhere: <https://PollEv.com/enriquequezada937>

How Religious Is the United States?

Americans' Religious Identification (1975–2018)

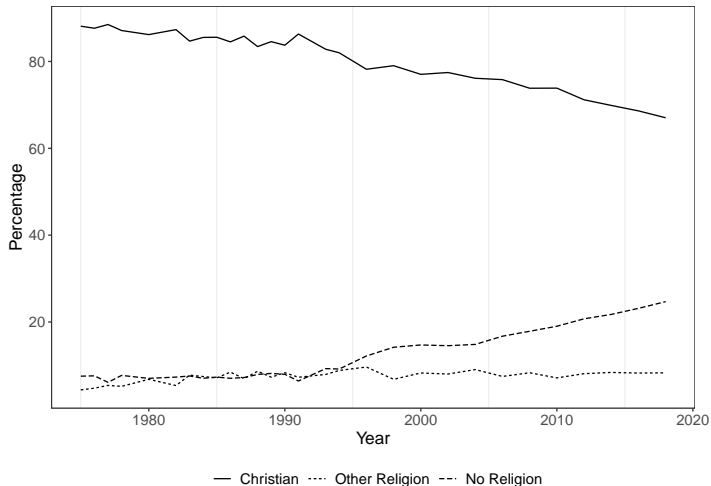
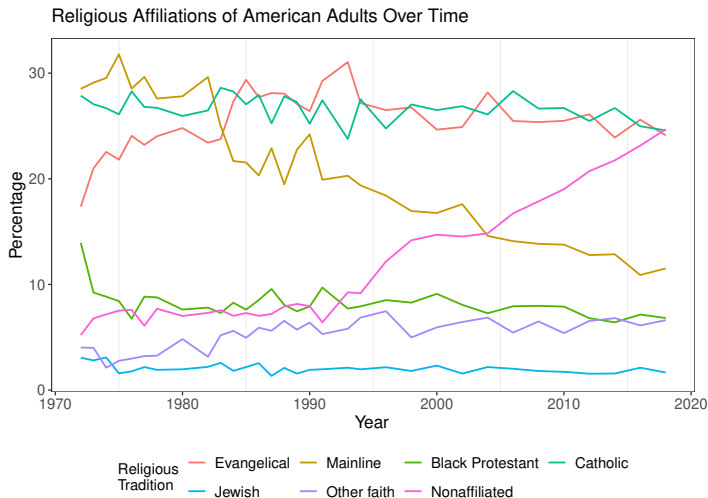


Figure 2: Source: GSS (1972–2018)

There Have Been Some Important Shifts In Religious Affiliation



Data: GSS (1972–2018)

Figure 3: Source: GSS (1972–2018)

More Than 80% of American Adults Believe in God

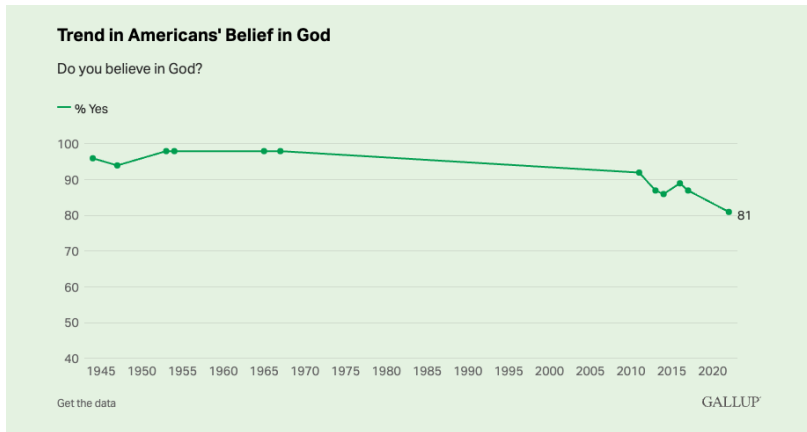


Figure 4: Gallup (2022)

Church Attendance and Membership Are Also in Decline

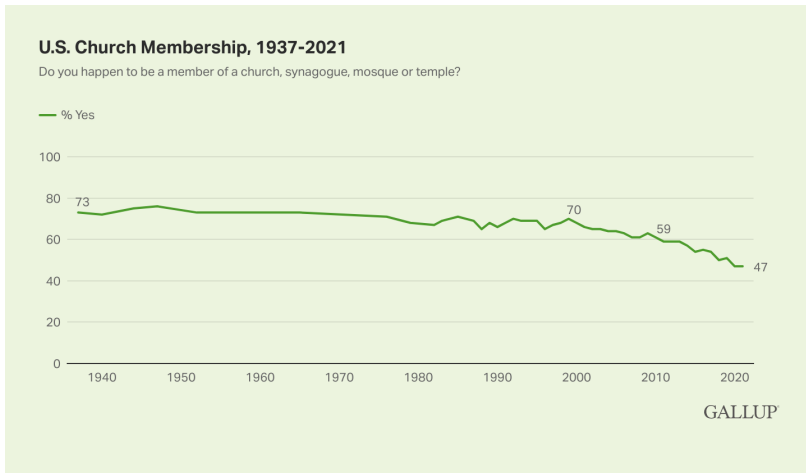


Figure 5: Gallup (2021)

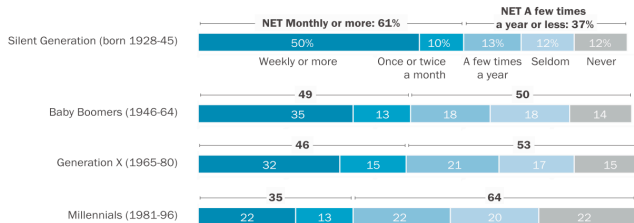
Younger Americans Are Much Less Religious

Large generation gap in American religion

In 2018/2019, % of U.S. adults who identify as ...



In 2018/2019, % of U.S. adults who say they attend religious services ...



Note: Don't know/refused not shown.

Source: Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted January 2018-July 2019 on the telephone.

"In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace"

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Figure 6: PEW (2019)

For Next Class

Read

- ▶ Hertzke, Allen D., Laura R. Olson, Kevin R. den Dulk, and Robert Booth Fowler. 2018. "Church and State in the Courts." *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices*. 6th ed. New York, NY: Routledge. (Chapter 12)

We're done!

Questions or comments?

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References

Wald, Kenneth D. and Allison Calhoun-Brown. 2010. Religion and Politics in the United States. Sixth edition edition ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.