



Loss of Identity:

The Religious Passiveness of American Youth

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Abstract

This research aims to learn about the decline in religion among American teenagers and young adults. More specifically, it looks at the growing disinterest and the increase in religious “nones” among these groups and identifies significant reasons for the growth in passiveness and unaffiliating. The author wanted to undertake this project to understand what is changing in American culture, leading to lower levels of religiosity. Although religious affiliation is higher than two hundred years ago, many self-identify within the group but do not practice—the research aimed to unpack the numbers on religion in the United States and see what they meant. The core of this project is based on data compiled from national polling agencies. After finding the data, reports, articles, and academic texts are synthesized to understand religious phenomena while looking at religious beliefs and behavior. Then, the study found how generational differences play a significant role in the decline in religiosity. Family life, technology, and current events are all responsible for the fall, not to mention institutional issues causing a lack of trust or desire to affiliate with a religious group. Overall, the paper found that the decline in religion among American youths and young adults will continue. As American culture grows secular and tensions weaken, people will steadily lose faith.

Keywords: *Religiosity, Belief, Passiveness, Teenagers, Young Adults, Nones*

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1. Introduction

The research presented in this paper focuses on the decline of religion among American teenagers and young adults. Throughout the article, adolescents, teenagers, or youth will represent 13 to 18-year-olds, and young adults will represent 19 to 29-year-olds.

This paper is split between two main sections, focusing on religious belief and behavior. Religious belief focuses on one's identity and belief in religion and God. Religious behavior focuses on how someone's religious identity shapes their lives and social participation. The intention in separating the two sections is first to emphasize the number of people who identify as religious "*nones*." Religious "*nones*" are those who do not identify with a religion.¹ There is a quickly growing number of "*nones*" in the United States. After establishing the importance of the rise of "*nones*," this study will look at how, even amongst those who claim a religious affiliation, an increasing number do not demonstrate a strong knowledge or emphasis of behavior based on their religion. Another common term is "*interfaith marriages*" where the partners hold different religious affiliations.

This study focuses on the two sections' main reasons for growing declines. First, it looked at statistical trends from polling sites. After establishing the statistics behind the fall, this research wanted to learn the reason for the percentages and numbers. So, it looked at how generational growth and differences play a part in the lack of religiosity in the United States. Then, building on generational differences, the paper looks at how cultural change has led to idolizing different ideals and morals. The growth and widespread use of technology aid the two previously stated subjects. Technology is another primary reason for the lack of religion in the United States, and it helps spread many new and different ideas lacking religious affiliation and meaning.

“...building on generational differences, the paper looks at how cultural change has led to idolizing different ideals and morals.”

¹ The Pew Research Center. "*Nones*" on the Rise. Washington, DC, 2012.

Through this research, the author will explain and analyze why there is a lack of religiosity in America's youth and young adults. The inspiration for this research came from the *Catholicism in the United States* class. In the course, a book by Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, was analyzed by studying religion among American youths and their relationships with faith. From reading this book, discussing the context and application in the United States, and looking at the decline, the author realized that religion was no longer essential for many Americans, leading to this research and writing this paper. Due to this initial inspiration and the helpfulness of including a case study, the paper will focus on the decline of Catholicism in the United States. This study will go into more detail about the previously stated subject matters and hopefully identify more detailed and concrete reasons for the decline of Catholicism and how to stop the fall.

“This study will...hopefully identify more detailed and concrete reasons for the decline of Catholicism and how to stop the fall.”

2. The Decline of Religious Belief and Behavior

2.1 Statistics and Trends

There is an unprecedented drop in religiousness among American adolescents (13-18) and young adults (19-29). One of the two benchmarks chosen is belief in religion. The focus of belief is not the aspects of religion, such as the application of morals or service attendance. Belief is more general, emphasizing believing in a religion, a God, or religious teachings. Belief is dropping across America in almost every sect of religious faith. There is not one reason for the decline but instead several factors. This research seeks a comprehensive answer by examining survey statistics, generational change, cultural advancements, and religious exposure through education.

Generally, polls show a significant decline in religious belief in the United States. The fall grows more significant from one generation to the next. Each generation sees a drop in religiosity, and because one age group is less religious, it is less likely to be passed on to their kids.

“Each generation sees a drop in religiosity, and because one age group is less religious, it is less likely to be passed on to their kids.”

The culture of the last 10 to 20 years also helped lead religion to the current cultural relationship. In the growing age of technology, new ideas spread faster than ever, leaving younger, impressionable minds with more stimulants. Additionally, recently, there has been a decline in parochial schools, so young people are less exposed to religion. Also, polling shows that highly educated people are less religious or likely to become religious.² In the following sections, the paper goes into greater depth to find a clear answer for the fall of religiosity in America’s youth and young adults.

2.2 Understanding Belief

It is common for significant polling sites to track religious affiliation in the United States. Over the last 20 years, religious belief has sharply declined amongst young adults and youth. Around 36 percent of young adults identified as “*nones*” now, whereas, amongst Americans ranging from 30 to 49 years old, only 25 percent are “*nones*.”³ Among teenagers, 32 percent identify as “*nones*” compared to their parents, only 24 percent.⁴ There are numerous reasons for the decline, but the data gives an essential outline before establishing them. First, the study will compare young adults (19-29) with middle-aged adults (30-49) to show the decline. Then, it will compare youths (13-18) to their parents (age different per respective parent). Sixteen percent of young adults say they do not believe in God, but only 9 percent do not believe in God among the older generation.⁵ This seven-point difference comprises the 62 percent of 30 to 49-year-olds that “*believe in God, certain*” compared to the 51 percent of young adults.⁶

² The Pew Research Center. *In America, Does More Education Equal Less Religion*. Washington, DC, 2017.

³ The Pew Research Center. *Religious Landscape 18-29 Year Olds*. Washington, DC, 2014.

⁴ The Pew Research Center. *U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals*. Washington, DC, 2020.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

“Among teenagers, 32 percent identify as “*nones*” compared to their parents, only 24 percent.”

Following this trend is the importance that each demographic puts on religion. Only 40 percent of young adults say religion is “*vital*” in their lives compared to 52 percent of the previous generation.⁷ In the younger generation, 32 percent either identify with groups that see religion as “*not too important*” or “*not important at all*,” compared to only 23 percent of 30 to 49-year-olds.

The numbers are similar between adolescents and parents but even more drastic. Only 23 percent of teenagers say religion is “*vital*,” whereas 43 percent of their parents say it is essential. Thirty-nine percent of youth say it is “*not too important*” or “*unimportant*” compared to 26 percent amongst their parents.⁸ These percentages are further off than young adults from middle-aged adults. It shows how the numbers will continue to decline as more youths join the young adult age range. As they become parents, they will be less likely to instill religion in their kids if they are not religious. Like the 30 to 49 age range, 63 percent of parents believe in God.⁹ Only 40 percent of youth certainly believe in God. More and more youth lack religious belief, which will only grow.

The younger the person is, the less likely that person is to have a religious affiliation, faith in God, or see the importance of religion. The trend will only grow as younger people continue to see a decline in faith. As they become adults and have kids, they will lack the ability or desire to instill religion in their families. The tendency is expected to continue to increase, and more and more youths will be non-religious. Studies show that those not raised religiously are less likely to be religious when they are older, so a more secularized United States is the unavoidable future.

“Thirty-nine percent of youth say [*religion*] is not too important or unimportant compared to 26 percent amongst their parents.”

⁷ The Pew Research Center, *U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

2.3 Behavioral Trends

Along with tracking religious affiliation, polling sites collect data on behavioral aspects of religion, such as “frequency of prayer” or “belief in Heaven.” These metrics go beyond religious affiliation. They measure how often Americans participate in religion and if their religion shapes their lives and beliefs. Around 75% of Americans claim a religious affiliation, yet the number who regularly attend religious services is steadily declining.¹⁰ There is much more to someone’s religious identity than just claiming affiliation.

“...polling sites collect data on behavioral aspects of religion, such as “frequency of prayer” or “belief in Heaven.”

Again, the study first compares young adults (18-29) with middle-aged adults (30-49). Among young adults, only 40% say that their religion is “significant” to them.¹¹ So clearly, there is a disparity between affiliation and importance. This number is significantly lower than the 51% of middle-aged Americans who say religion is “vital” to them.¹² Additionally, only 27% of young adults attend religious services weekly compared to 33% of middle-aged adults. The decline in attendance comes from several reasons, but one is less frequent attendance as children. Even compared to 50 to 64-year-olds, there is a 5% decrease in attendance (38%).¹³ So between these three generations, an 11% decrease continues to grow.

“Only 41% of young adults pray daily, whereas 54% of middle-aged Americans pray daily.”

Some of the most drastic differences come in prayer. Only 41% of young adults pray daily, whereas 54% of middle-aged Americans pray daily. The change is clear-cut because 34% of young adults never pray, whereas only 23% of middle-aged adults never pray. This 11% difference is only 2% points off from the 13% difference in daily prayer. The disparity shows that young adults pray more than just less frequently. They just are not praying.

¹⁰ Jeffery Jones. *How Religious Are Americans?* Washington, DC, 2021.

¹¹ The Pew Research Center. *Religious Landscape 18-29 Year Olds*. Washington, DC, 2014.

¹² The Pew Research Center. *Religious Landscape 30-49 Year Olds*. Washington, DC, 2014.

¹³ The Pew Research Center. *Religious Landscape 50-64 Year Olds*. Washington, DC, 2014.

Another critical metric demonstrating the difference in behavior between young and middle-aged adults is “*sources of guidance for right and wrong*.” Only 24% of young adults use *religion* the most in determining right from wrong, whereas 32% of adults claim *religion* is the leading factor. There was an increase in all the cited categories: *philosophy* (6% increase), *common sense* (2% increase), and *science* (2% increase). Even the way that young adults decipher right from wrong is less religious than it once was. Taking the place of religion is a new scientific evolution and a return to philosophy. Young adults do not just claim less religious affiliation; religion plays a minor role in their daily lives. Instead of being a significant part of their lives, it is often secondary or non-existent.

As previously stated, American adolescents are less likely to be religious than their parents. There is an overall decline in religious affiliation between the two groups. No group looks to religion less when it comes to moral guidance. Only 21% of adolescents say they look to religion “*a lot*” when looking for moral guidance. Sixty-one percent say they look to the family “*a lot*,” and 58% look to common sense “*a lot*.”¹⁴ This is partly due to teenagers’ lack of knowledge of religion and the fact that they are more impressionable and often look towards family. It also says something about the importance and role of religion for teenagers in America.

Interestingly, teenagers’ religious worship attendance usually corresponds with their parents. Only 32% of teenagers report going to services at a different frequency than their parents.¹⁵ More broadly, 88% of teenagers whose parents go at least monthly will also go monthly, and 89% whose parents go only a few times a year also only go a few times a year or never go. Notably, there are more considerable behavioral differences outside of attendance. This is likely because most other behavioral metrics, such as prayer, are more personal and harder to enforce. For example, only 27% of adolescents say they pray daily, as 48% of their parents pray daily.¹⁶

“...American adolescents are less likely to be religious than their parents. There is an overall decline in religious affiliation between the two groups.”

¹⁴ The Pew Research Center, *U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

“...only 27% of adolescents say they pray daily, as 48% of their parents pray daily.”

One of the leading causes of the decline of religion among American teenagers is family relationships. Ninety-five percent of teenagers’ parents say their kids have at least somewhat similar religious beliefs. So, the decline must partly be due to fewer religious tendencies among parents.¹⁷ This is mainly because parents of teenagers do not feel that religious values are not the most important thing to teach their kids. Polled parents

say they would rather their kids be *financially successful* (69%) and *attend college* (71%) than be *raised in their religion* (44%).¹⁸ So, one of the key issues raised is that parents do not value *religion* as much as they once did. They do not find it necessary to raise their kids religiously. Cultural and economic factors are the most important ideas for parents to instill.

3. Generational Differences: A Driving Force of Change in Life

3.1 The Role of Marriage

The secularization of marriage and interfaith marriages is at the center of the decline of religious belief among American youths and young adults. Two driving forces behind religious belief are exposure and participation in childhood. Studies show that Americans raised without religious participation rarely turn to religion in adulthood. Many “*nones*” are also among children raised by parents of different religions.¹⁹ Essential family dynamics assume children will follow their parent’s religion, so if exposed to any or one central one, their faith tends to waiver or lack completely.

“...Americans raised without religious participation rarely turn to religion in adulthood.”

¹⁷ The Pew Research Center, *U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The Pew Research Center, *One-in-Five U.S. Adults Were Raised in Interfaith Homes*. Washington, DC, 2016.

The shift to interfaith and secular marriages since 1972 is profound. As of 2022, 59% of married couples share the same religious faith, a 22% drop from 81% in 1972. There are several social and cultural reasons for the decline. The main reason is that most Americans do not value *religion* as much as they did 50 years ago.

“After marriage, only 27% say their partner’s religion was “vital” in deciding to marry.”

Only 48% of couples say “*the same moral and religious beliefs*” matter in a marriage. Sixty-three percent say “*a steady job*” is essential, and 73% see “*similar views on children*” as necessary.²⁰ Economic stability appears more important in relationships than religion. Most important is similar opinions on kids and interests. Religion is essential

in a relationship for those with a profound interest in faith. Still, there is a fleeting number of religious Americans.²¹ However, almost a majority of Americans emphasize the importance of religion in marriage. After marriage, only 27% say their partner’s religion was “*vital*” in deciding to marry.²² Culturally, religion plays a minor role in relationships as new issues and values take new significance levels.

Since 1972, there has been an increase in interfaith marriages, with 14% being interfaith. An even more drastic change is the increase in entirely secular marriages, which now account for 12% of marriages compared to 3% in 1972. A significant reason for the rise in secular marriages is the increase in religious “*nones*” in the United States. Based on the data, the number of secular marriages will increase. One of the significant reasons for interfaith marriages is the decline in religious importance for prospective couples. It also means there is less commitment to religion within a marriage. Only 16% of Americans in interfaith marriages attend services weekly, whereas 44% of couples who share in faith attend weekly services.²³ As previously stated, there is a significant correlation between religious belief in adult and teenage years and service attendance in childhood. Just 1% of secular relationships attend a service weekly. An *interfaith marriage* does not equate to a significant rise in religious doubt or disbelief in God.

²⁰ The Pew Research Center, *Record Share of Americans Have Never Married*. Washington, DC, 2014.

²¹ The Pew Research Center, *One-in-Five U.S. Adults Were Raised in Interfaith Homes*.

²² Ibid.

²³ Daniel Cox. *Emerging Trends and Enduring Patterns in American Family Life*. Washington, DC, 2022.

“An *interfaith marriage* does not equate to a significant rise in religious doubt or disbelief in God.”

Nineteen percent of interfaith families and 13% of couples with a shared faith express disbelief. Although religious attendance drops in interfaith marriages, there is still a belief. The belief is just different. Interestingly, it is hard to find differences between the upbringing of those in interfaith and religious relationships in religious respects. Amongst both demographics, 58 percent say they attended religious weekly as children. In almost all major religious polls, their upbringing is similar. One possible reason for the lack of religion in interfaith couples is a change in social norms. It is less common for one relationship member to convert to the other's religion. The second primary reason is that most interfaith marriages occur between Christians and non-Christians. This is mainly due to decreased confidence in Christians' faith and institutions. Christians are more likely to marry outside their faith than Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons, Muslims, and Jews. As a result, they are less likely to emphasize their faith with their kids or spouses.

3.2 Lack of Confidence

Marriage is one reason for the decline in religion. Another leading factor that also partially relates to marriage is a lack of confidence. As mentioned earlier, spouses are less likely to adopt their spouse's religion, primarily due to dwindling confidence in their religion. In the last 50 years, confidence in church or organized religion dropped drastically. The peak of confidence came in 1974, with 68% saying they were confident. Currently, it is lower than ever before at 36%.²⁴ The confidence level was at 60% in 2000, but since then, the number quickly dropped, staying below 50% since 2012 and under 40% since 2016. Lack of confidence is more than just a number. It is a phenomenon caused by several factors. It was once the most trusted institution in the United States until the military took the lead in 1986. What changed?

²⁴ Justin McCarthy. *U.S. Confidence in Organized Religion Remains Low*. Washington, DC, 2019.

“...spouses are less likely to adopt their spouse’s religion, primarily due to dwindling confidence in their religion.”

This statistic is partially misleading. There is a lower confidence level in religion, so Americans are moving away from organized religion. However, some are moving towards other faith practices, such as faith groups and informal meetings at which no denominational claims are present. There are more concrete reasons for the decline in religious confidence that change depending on the religious organization.

One major denomination in the United States that saw a significant drop in affiliation and confidence in organized religion is American Catholicism. The 2002 sexual abuse scandal shocked Catholics and upset their institution. As of 2022, only 18.7% of Americans identify as Catholic.²⁵ These numbers reflect an exodus from the church. Not all or even most Catholics left their religion, but their trust fell. This did not just affect Catholics. It led to increased concerns about organized religion in the United States. In 2000, Americans had 60% confidence in organized religion, which dropped to 44% in 2002.²⁶ In two years, the scandal plummeted the nation’s confidence. Among Catholics, only 42% were confident compared to 58% of protestants.²⁷ Catholics saw a sharper decline than any other religious group. As well as a mistrust in organizational religion, there is decreasing trust in clergy members. In 2000, around 65% of Americans saw clergy as *honest* and *ethical*, which dropped to 36% in 2021.²⁸ There has also been a particularly steep drop amongst Catholics, who have 31% positive views.

“One major denomination in the United States that saw a significant drop in affiliation and confidence in organized religion is American Catholicism.”

²⁵ Kevin Jones. *U.S. Catholic Population Shows Growth, Trends Southward*. Denver, 2022.

²⁶ Justin McCarthy. *U.S. Confidence in Organized Religion Remains Low*.

²⁷ Megan Brennan. *U.S. Catholics’ Faith in Clergy Is Shaken*. Washington, DC, 2019.

²⁸ Lydia Saad. *Military Brass, Judges Among Professions at New Image Lows*. Washington, DC, 2022.

3.3 Education: A Twofold Story

The story of education and religion is quite interesting. Americans with higher levels of education tend to be less religious than those with lower education levels. Pew Research found that 46% of college graduates say religion is “*vital*” to them, whereas 58% of people with no more than a high school level of education say religion is “*vital*.”

“...46% of college graduates say religion is “*vital*” to them, whereas 58% of people with no more than a high school level of education say religion is “*vital*.”

Generally, college-educated Americans show less belief in religion. College graduates are less likely to say they believe in God and pray less often. Interestingly, the religious behaviors of college-educated and non-college-educated are very similar. Thirty-six percent of college graduates say they attend religious services weekly, and 37% of high school or less say they attend weekly.²⁹ If broken down further, the numbers are almost the same for Christians in all aspects of behavior and belief. Although college-educated Americans are more likely to identify as “*nones*,” those who maintain faith tend to be as observant. Among Christian college graduates, 67% pray daily, the same as those who attended high school or lower. The same is true for their religious commitment and belief in God. The numbers are also very similar among college-educated and high-school-educated Muslims in the United States. Sixty-six percent of college-educated and 67% of high school-educated Muslims pray daily. Ninety-five percent of college and non-college grads say they believe in God.³⁰ Overall, college graduates are less likely to be religious. Those who have faith are just as religious as high school graduates. The college experience directly impacts the faith of Americans. In universities across the country, liberal education leads to the endorsement of science, philosophy, and the humanities with less influence on religion.

²⁹ The Pew Research Center. *In America, Does More Education Equal Less Religion*. Washington, DC, 2017.

³⁰ Ibid.

Research started in the 1970s by Kirk Hadaway and Wade Roof found that college students were more likely to abandon their faith than other demographics because they were young, male, and often affluent.³¹ They were a group that disliked traditional institutions and were exposed to new thinking ideas.

Today, more Americans are going to college than fifty years ago. The college student is no longer just an affluent young man; instead, he/she is a young person of all identities, yet there is still a decline in religion among them. As of 2016, 31% of college students no longer claim a religious affiliation, whereas thirty years earlier, in 1986, only 10% identified as religious “*nones*.”³² As the number of Americans who attend college continues to rise, so will the number of young adults who are spiritual “*nones*.”

University and college campuses are places filled with different viewpoints and ideas. It is where young people go to think, contemplate, and reflect. It is the home of many social movements, some of which are adverse to religion. Even though the author attends a Catholic university, he has experienced this from his college student experience and research. Classes in philosophy focus on different ways to look at life outside of religion. Science is a primary reason people give for understanding the universe and is taught on every college campus to almost all students.

“[University and college campuses are] ...where young people go to think, contemplate, and reflect. It is the home of many social movements, some of which are adverse to religion.”

Additionally, socially, the students stay away from religion as a community. Culturally, there are other more important events as well as negative social connotations about religion that lead some to practice less. In talking to a Boston College alum from the 1990s, she told the author that Sunday church was a social gathering almost everyone felt obligated to attend for social reasons, if not religious. Today, if one goes to that church on campus, it is filled with families, not students. Religion has fallen out culturally among college students, even at religious institutions.

³¹ C. Kirk Hadaway. *Identifying American Apostates: A Cluster Analysis*. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1989.

³² Allen Downey. *College Freshman Are Less Religious Than Ever*. New York, NY, 2017.

The lack of religious ideology on college campuses has become an issue for some students, specifically *Underrepresented First-Generation, Low-Income Students* (UFGLI). These students also tend to be members of the *Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color* (BIPOC) community. Most universities and colleges, if religious, tend to be Catholic or mainstream Protestant. Universities that are not religious or were once religious still accommodate most Protestant students. This often isolates UFGLI students because their religion lacks representation on campus; they need a way to connect with their community.³³ This is only the case for some UFGLI students. However, it is a problem at many higher education institutions.

“Most universities and colleges, if religious, tend to be Catholic or mainstream Protestant.”

4. The Age of Technology and a Global Pandemic

4.1 The Impact of the Internet and Social Media

The rise of technology is paralleling the decline of religiosity among youths and young adults. Technology is not entirely guilty of causing lowering trends in religion, but it does play a factor. The Internet exposes people to new and different ideas. It also desensitizes youths who can see more than ever before. Growing confidence in science is also a factor. As people look for answers about their existence and the world, science quickly finds solutions that once laid religious beliefs. Statisticians found a direct correlation between the rise in internet usage and the drop in religion. A computer science professor, Allan Downey, says that the Internet can account for a 25% drop off in faith as of 2014.³⁴ This may merely be a correlation and not causation. However, there is some relationship between the fall of religion and the Internet. Among Americans, teenagers and young adults use the Internet and smartphone devices more than any other demographic.

³³ Elliott Ingersoll, Sophia Elliott, and Stephanie Dracar. *Spiritual and Religious Support for Underrepresented First-Generation, Low-Income (UFGLI) Students*, Religions 12, no. 7: 548, 2021.

³⁴ MIT Technology Review. *How the Internet Is Taking Away America's Religion*. Cambridge, MA, 2014.

“...there is some relationship between the fall of religion and the Internet. Among Americans, teenagers and young adults use the internet and smartphone devices more than any other demographic.”

Since polling on internet usage started in 2000, young adults have used the Internet the most. Since 2013, over 97% of young adults have used the Internet.³⁵ Similarly, among adolescents, 97% report using the Internet.³⁶ Religion can also utilize technology to its advantage. Many Western institutions spend exuberant amounts on outreach via technological advancements, yet these institutions need to see growth. The Internet and digital age have moved religion onto screens instead of paper, making it even more accessible, but this does not equate directly to change. This raises the question of how religious institutions are investing so heavily in the age of technology, yet their religion is shrinking, specifically in the United States. There is not one answer or even an objectively correct answer. Churches may be focusing too much on missionary goals instead of meeting the needs of their members. Their teaching may continue. Alternatively, there is an impersonal feeling with technology that results in disinterested or mistrusting feelings.

Additionally, adolescents are the most dependent on social media. It is dangerous to say that social media is playing a part in the decline of religiosity among youths, but as Downey showed with Internet usage, there is some correlation. Churches can use social media positively to increase membership attendance. It also gives teenagers access to new ideas and belief systems. It is dangerous to say social media is the reason for the lack of religion. There is a correlation but certainly no evidence of causation. Still, there are some examples of how social media hurts religiosity. One effect of social media is teens’ “pick and choose” approach to religion. Teenagers tend to choose or believe in certain aspects of their faith, but not all, leading to a weaker connection and relationship with their religion. Social media also has positive impacts on religion. The same study by Baylor University found that teenagers who use social media are more likely to find it acceptable to “*experiment*” with other faiths.³⁷

³⁵ The Pew Research Center. *Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet*. Washington, DC, 2021.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Baylor University. *Faith and ‘The Facebook Effect’: Young Social Media Regulars Less Committed to One Religion, Baylor University Study Finds*. Waco, TX, 2016.

Social media allows youths to learn, explore more beliefs, and find one that resonates with them. This may lead to more young people who do not share a faith with their parents or struggle to find one religion that encompasses their belief system.

4.2 The Effect of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted religiosity in the United States. The primary issue was the inability to attend in-person weekly services. In the summer of 2020, only 13% of Americans reported hearing weekly in-person religious services, a drop from the pre-pandemic norm (no concise pre-pandemic number). As of 2022, 20% of Americans say they attend religious services less now than before the pandemic.³⁸ Unsurprisingly, being unable to participate in in-person worship led to a decline in attendance. As people leave the habit of attending service, they are less likely to start again. Among young adults and adolescents, both demographics technologically capable, still saw a decline in weekly service attendance in-person or via online mediums. Previously to the pandemic, their reduction was noticeable, and widespread lockdowns only worsened the problem. Before the outbreak in 2020, 30% of young adults never attended services, whereas 40% reported never attending services after the pandemic. The pandemic affected young adults' religion more than any other demographic (no date for teenagers). Thirty percent of young adults are less religiously active during post-pandemic, which is higher than any other age group. Interestingly, Black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics saw the most significant drop in religious activity after the pandemic.³⁹ There is no definitive answer for the specific decline of these two groups.

“...Black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics saw the most significant drop in religious activity after the pandemic.”

³⁸ Justin Nortey and Michael Rotolo. *How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at U.S. Religious Services*. Washington, DC, 2023.

³⁹ Benz Witt-Swanson and Faith Cox. *After the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Changed American Religion*. Washington, DC, 2023.

Not all young adults saw such a significant decline in religious participation. Notably, liberal young adults saw a 15% increase from 31% to 46% of never attending religious services, 9% more than conservatives.⁴⁰ Political affiliation was the most dividing metric for participation even before the pandemic. Conservatives were already more likely to attend religious services than liberals. This points to a cultural difference between liberals and conservatives. As of 2014, 50% of conservatives participate in religious service weekly versus 22% of liberals. Furthermore, 70% of conservatives say religious ideology is essential in their life versus 36% of liberals. The two groups' spiritual value difference derives from each group's ideology. Conservative social views tend to align more with religious doctrine than the social views of liberals. For example, conservatives generally are pro-life and are more likely to oppose same-sex marriage. Fundamentally, conservatives see a more significant relationship between “church” and “state” than liberals. Liberals have a stronger belief in the importance of the separation of church and state than conservatives. So culturally, it makes sense that liberals saw a more significant increase in religious decline from the pandemic. They already valued religion less, so they were less likely to go out of their way to keep their practices.

“...conservatives see a more significant relationship between “church” and “state” than liberals. Liberals have a stronger belief in the importance of the separation of church and state than conservatives.”

Generation Z and Millennials are the groups that teenagers and young adults identify as more liberal than other generations. Ideally, there would be data by age range (teenager and young adult), but the generations should be accurate enough. Generation Z members are more likely to identify with liberal ideologies, which leads to liberal political leaning. In contrast, a smaller number of Generation Z members identify with conservative ideology and even those who do differ significantly on several vital issues, such as climate change.⁴¹ Millennials are also more likely to lean liberal and are the generation who identify most with the Democrat Party, which tends to hold more liberal views.

⁴⁰ Benz Witt-Swanson and Faith Cox. *After the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Changed American Religion*.

⁴¹ Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik. *On The Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far*. Washington, DC, 2020.

Teenagers and young adults are part of these two generations who remember more liberally, so it makes sense for their religious decline, primarily due to the pandemic. Suppose there is a correlation between political leaning and religious participation, which there appears to be. In that case, it is logical for young adults and teenagers to see the most significant increase in non-participation in religious services. Overall, more teenagers and young adults place less importance on religion than older generations (30–49, 50–64, and 65+).

“...more teenagers and young adults place less importance on religion than older generations.”

4.3 Online Worship Behaviors

During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious institutions also tried using technology to help keep community and religious activity among their members. As a result of the lockdown, there was a significant uptick in online religious services and televised Masses. Ultimately, Americans who switched to electronic services stuck with them or changed to in-person worship when made available. In July 2002, 40% of American adults attended weekly services, which stayed relatively steady throughout the pandemic. As of November 2022, 40% of adults attend some form of worship. So, the pandemic, as stated above, did lead to a decrease in religious participation, but this happened at the very start of the pandemic.⁴² Americans who quickly adapted to a new way of worship continued to participate. For many, it was a coping tool to help keep a community feeling. Virtual worship peaked at the pandemic’s start but did not dissuade those who used it to leave their religion.

Some critical differences between in-person and virtual worship likely caused the decline in participation at the beginning of the pandemic. First is the apparent lack of connection to other worshippers from virtual forms. Virtual worship meant less physical community and contact with other members of their community. This leads to isolated feelings and less social pressure or responsibility to keep up faith practices.

⁴² Justin Nortey and Michael Rotolo. *How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at U.S. Religious Services*.

“Virtual worship meant less physical community and contact with other members of their community. This leads to isolated feelings and less social pressure or responsibility to keep up faith practices.”

For example, 65% of in-person worship attendees feel “a great deal” or “quite a bit of connection” between them and their community. Only 28% of virtual worshippers feel connected with those in-person, and 22% feel associated with other virtual attendees.⁴³ Outside of disconnecting from the community, virtual worship also leads to a higher percentage of people who do not think they are genuinely part of worship or ceremony. Only 25% of virtual worshippers felt they were part of the worship, not just watching. Within virtual worship, a higher percentage of Blacks (33%) or Hispanics (33%) feel as if they are participating in worship than Whites (18%). There seem to be cultural or even ethnic differences in worship, too, which leads to greater feelings of belonging and meaning in virtual worship.⁴⁴ Overall, Americans who participated in virtual worship enjoyed their experiences. Sixty-six percent of Americans who regularly watched virtual services were “extremely” or “very” satisfied with their virtual worship. They say the sermons and teachings were practical. Ultimately, virtual worship successfully maintained church attendance among those willing to try and use virtual means. On the other hand, it quickly became an excuse for members of religious institutions to flee their faith and move away from their religious identity.

5. Catholic Case Study

To show the realities of religious decline in the United States, the author looked closer at Catholicism in the United States. Since 1998, Catholicism has been the religious sect with the most significant decrease in affiliation in the United States. From 1998 to 2018, there was an 18% decrease in collaboration.⁴⁵ Due to the severity of this decline and the author’s own religious identity, Catholicism is chosen as a case study.

⁴³ Michelle Faverio, Justin Nortey, Jeff Diamant, and Gregory A. Smith. *Online Religious Appeal to Many Americans, But Going In Person Remains More Popular*. Washington, DC, 2023.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The Pew Research Center. *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*. Washington, DC, 2019.

From generation to generation, the percentage of Catholics decreases. Among older adults (50-64), 23% of the population identified as Catholics, whereas only 16% of young adults identified as Catholic. The affiliation of adolescents does not follow this trend. The Pew Research Center reports that 24% of adolescents are Catholic.⁴⁶ This is shocking, considering the steady decline from one age group to the next. This is mainly because most adolescents continue to identify as Catholic even after they no longer feel connected with the religion. They may even continue to attend services, but this is because of family pressures. Although reports say that the path to leaving the Catholic church starts at 13, the start of adolescence is not until much later that they start identifying as a different religion or as a “none.”

“Although reports say that the path to leaving the Catholic church starts at 13, the start of adolescence is not until much later that they start identifying as a different religion or as a “none.”

5.1 Catholic Education

The decline of Catholic education over the last fifty years is startling. For example, in 1970, there were over 11,000 Catholic schools. Now, there are about 6,000. The decline of Catholic education is happening across all levels of education. The National Catholic Education Association reported a 6.4% decrease in enrollment across all United States Catholic schools from the 2019-2020 school year to the 2020-2021 school year. This extra significant decrease resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, 2021-2022 saw the most marked increase, 68,000 students, of the last 20 years.⁴⁷ For the last 20 years, there has been a subtle decrease. At the same time, an average of 100 Catholic schools close or consolidate with another school a year.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ The Pew Research Center. *U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together, and Enjoy Family Rituals*.

⁴⁷ Luis Henao. *Enrollment in US Catholic Schools Rebounds After Sharp Drop*, New York, NY, 2022.

⁴⁸ National Catholic Educational Association. *Date Brief: Catholic School Enrollment and School Closures Post-COVID-19*. Leesburg, VA, 2021.

Over the last two years, there has generally been positivity among Catholic education leaders in the United States. At the end of 2022-2023, only 44 Catholic schools closed or consolidated.⁴⁹ These are encouraging numbers. In some regions, there remains a steady decline. Over the last four school years, the Mideast (DE, DC, MD, NJ, NY, and PA) has seen a decrease of 7.5% in student enrollment. In contrast, the Southeast (NC, SC, and VA) saw a 1.7% increase, although small and impressive considering the state of religion in the United States.

Taking a closer look at high schools that accommodate the larger half of the teenage population, there are currently 1,205 Catholic high schools in the U.S. The number of Catholic secondary schools remained steady through both decreases of the 2000s, with a low of 1,195 schools in 2013-2014 and a high of 1,228 in 2001-2002 and 2003-2004. 1980, there were 1,540, and in 1970, there were

1,986 Catholic secondary schools.⁵⁰ Over the last 50 years, 700 Catholic high schools have closed, and at the same time, the number of high school-aged students has increased. There are several reasons for this, but one is the increased funding for public education and soaring prices for Catholic education.

“Taking a closer look at high schools that accommodate the larger half of the teenage population, there are currently 1,205 Catholic high schools in the U.S.”

As a result, fewer people will attend as it becomes more expensive and public schools remain reliable. The enrollment numbers are even worse from the lens of the Catholic church. In 1970, there were 4,367,000 students in Catholic secondary schools, and as of today, there are 569,395 students. This is almost a decrease of almost 4 Million students, which is shocking considering there are more 15 to 19-year-olds today than in 1970. United States Census data shows that the number of 15 to 19-year-olds in 2020 was 21,656,363 versus 19,031,191 in 1970.⁵¹

⁴⁹ National Catholic Educational Association. *Date Brief: 2022-2023 Catholic School Enrollment*. Leesburg, VA, 2023.

⁵⁰ National Center for Education Statistics. *Enrollment and Instructional Staff in Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, by level: Selected Years, 1919-20 through 2016-2017*. Washington, DC, 2017.

⁵¹ The United States Census Bureau. *United States Census*. Washington, DC, 2023.

With an increase in the number of high-school-aged Americans, one would think the number of Americans attending Catholic secondary schools would rise because the demographic rose by 2 million. However, instead, the number declined by millions. There are numerous reasons for the decline of the Catholic school. In the same period, the number of Catholics in the United States declined and continues to decline.

“...one would think the number of Americans attending Catholic secondary schools would rise because the demographic rose by 2 million. However, instead, the number declined by millions.”

Additionally, the number of priests and nuns continues to decline, which affects Catholic schools that historically relied heavily on clergy to teach classes. In 1965, there were 58,632 priests. As of 2010, there are 39,993. Even more striking is the drop off in the number of nuns (a woman in a religious order), which was 179,954, and as of 2010, there were 57,544.⁵² Historically, many schools were run by nuns (or sisters), but as that number declined, they needed help to maintain operations. On the other hand, some Catholic schools remain open but are now run and taught by lay people. Another major issue causing the decline of Catholic schools and maybe a part of the number of adolescent and young adult Catholics is the secularization of Catholic schools. This secularization comes as good and evil, depending on the person's perspective. Some stronger in their faith feel Catholic education is shying away from its Catholic routes. It does not instill Catholic morals. Some also think that they do not teach or instill ideals about gender identity and abortion. At the same time, some argue the other side that these topics do not need to be enforced or invested in their kid's education.⁵³ Catholic schools must walk a fine line between secularization and not scare off strong Catholics but know that they must appeal to everyone to maintain enrollment. The true goal of Catholic education, specifically high schools, also comes to attention. In today's hyper-competitive world, parents pay tens of thousands of dollars for their kids to get into strong nationally ranked colleges, with learning about religion as a secondary cause. Research shows that overall, Catholic schools are stronger academically than public schools; however, this is not true for every school.

⁵² Bruce Cooper and John Surcau. *The Decline of the Religious in US Catholic Schools: The Effects on the Changing Religious Ethos on High School Seniors*. New York, NY, 2013.

⁵³ Thomas Carroll. *Putting the Catholic Back in Catholic Schools*. Denver, CO, 2022.

“Catholic schools must walk a fine line between secularization and not scare off strong Catholics but know that they must appeal to everyone to maintain enrollment.”

Gerald Grace did a study of 53 urban Catholic high schools and found that student's and parents' desire for higher test scores may distort the goals of Catholic education.⁵⁴ This study was conducted in 2002, and based on the author's experience, this is still true. Having attended Catholic school, the author knows that many of his peers were not there for the religious aspects but so they could get into better colleges. School leadership continues to talk about how faith is essential in their leadership and that the goal of their education is rooted in Catholic principles such as social justice. However, some parents do not care about these factors. Ultimately, the issue with Catholic schools is the people selling the product to people who no longer want that product.

Conclusion

There are countless reasons for the passiveness of religion among American youths and young adults. As American culture evolves, so does the role of religion. When the Puritans first arrived in the 19th century, religious participation in the United States was significantly lower than today.⁵⁵ Religion skyrocketed in the United States through the late 19th century and early 20th century, reaching affiliation levels between 60% and 70%. At the turn of the 21st century, levels of religion began to fade. Not to mention that many Americans who claim religious affiliation do not actively participate in their faith.

Among Americans, teenagers and young adults lead the charge in passiveness and unaffiliated. This boils down to a few significant factors. What marriage looks like and how it acts in the United States has changed. As religion becomes less significant in the lives of adults, they are more likely to marry someone of another faith, leading to lower levels of religious practice at home and for their children.

⁵⁴ Carrie Fuller and Lauri Johnson. *Tensions Between Catholic Identity and Academic Achievement at an Urban Catholic High School*. Catholic Education, 2013.

⁵⁵ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of American, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ, 1992.

Today's teenagers and young adults grow up in far less religious households than their parents or grandparents. Adolescents learn and take a faith interest more often if their parents do so. It is only logical that kids are less religious if their parents' faith is no longer strong.

The falling high esteem of institutional religion in the United States is another reason for the decline. On the one hand, parents' faith weakens as they learn not to trust the institutions of their religion due to factors such as scandals. This results in fewer religious kids, but youth are also highly critical and growing up in an age where the trust in institutional religion is low. American youth and young adults also are growing up during the age of technology. They now have access to more ideas, both right and wrong, through the Internet and social media. As a result of exposure to new ideas, they are left wondering what they should believe and think. This is another leading cause of passiveness. Most recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic caused detrimental damage to religion in the United States. Technology did not suffice, and church membership fell as people were stuck inside. Only now are levels of pre-pandemic attendance back.

Finally, education plays a significant role in the decline of religion. Americans with higher levels of education are less religious than others. As more and more people attend college, more Americans are exposed to liberal thinking and may turn to science or logic as a replacement for religion. Additionally, over the last few decades, fewer and fewer schools have been religiously affiliated. Historically, almost every major university was founded by a religious group and became secular. To this day, religiously affiliated schools are turning secular or just shutting down. As a result, people can no longer go to institutions designed to grow their faith.

In conclusion, it is impossible to point to one thing and say it is the cause of religious passiveness and the decline in affiliation among American youth and young adults. The answer lies in the evolution of culture and how Americans' home and social lives are changing. Religion is trying to find its new role in a society that does not need it like it once did.

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