

# THE TIDES OF RELIGION

**Leaving, Staying, and Returning to Faith**



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## Leaving, Staying, and Returning to Faith

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### Executive Summary

While 84% of the world's population still affiliates with a faith of some sort, there are clear indicators that people in the United States and elsewhere are abandoning religion. This shift toward secularization may have significant social and psychological consequences, because religion is often linked to better mental health, stronger social ties, and increased rates of marriage and childbearing. This report examines who and how many are leaving religion, which faiths are most affected by disaffiliation, individual and social consequences of a decline in religiosity, and factors increasing the likelihood of returning to faith.

### How Many Are Leaving Faith?

The number of religiously unaffiliated adults in the United States ("nones") has grown rapidly from approximately 5% just three decades ago to about 30% today. This increase is less about people deconverting but is almost entirely driven by the lower religiosity of younger generations compared to older ones. Today about 3 in 10 Americans do not affiliate with any faith, but for young adults it is approaching 5 in 10.

However, there is some tentative, preliminary evidence that the increase of "nones" has plateaued. And while the decline of religion is a perennial theme in public discourse, and predictions of the death of religion are centuries old, the data reveals that the world as a whole is actually becoming more religious.

### Who Stays? Who Goes?

The most significant period of religious turnover is in late adolescence and early adulthood, with one study showing that of individuals between the ages of 13 and 17, 16% identified as "nones," but the number increased to 27% when this same group reached 18–23 years old. An increasing number are raised without religion, but the majority of religious "nones" are deconverts from religion.

Factors associated with religious retention or deconversion include age, upbringing, gender, sexual orientation, personality, political affiliation, education levels, and family dynamics.

While women have historically been more likely to be religious than men, the gap has been narrowing since 2020, and in recent years some data has shown men as being more religious. Sexual minorities are likely leaving religion at higher rates, but nearly half of the LGBTQ adults polled in one study identified as religious. And while a college education has traditionally been seen as reducing religiosity, research shows that college-educated individuals may be less likely to leave.

## Which Faiths Are Most Impacted?

Some faith groups lose more of their youth to irreligion than others. For example, people raised Black Protestant tend to be more religious as adults, while people raised in the traditionally white, upper-class mainline Protestant denominations are more likely to leave religion. Nonreligious parents “lose” a lot of their youth to religion later in life as well, with nearly half of those who were raised without a faith tradition now identifying with a faith.

## Consequences of Disaffiliation

The decline of religion in the United States carries significant negative implications for individual health and well-being, family relationships, community cohesion, and demographic stability. Because of the positive correlation between religion and mental health, the decline in religion in society has the potential to be accompanied by poorer mental health in general. Certain prosocial characteristics associated with religiosity weaken as one spends more time outside faith: charitable giving, moral principles of ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and concerns for purity. The decline in religious participation correlates with lower marriage and birth rates. Increased rates of singlehood can impact mental health and longevity, and fewer children being born leads to economic concerns in the United States, where childbearing is already below replacement levels.

## Reconversion: Who Comes Back and Why?

While popular discourse often talks about people who leave religion as if they leave and never return, the fact is that many do find their way back. Most likely to return to faith are individuals whose parents “showed love, respect, and patience for those children who took a different path in religion.” Life transitions like marriage or parenthood also positively correlate with reconversion, and having school-aged children measurably increases one’s likelihood of returning to religion. Personal spiritual experiences and renewed connections with God are also common reasons for returning to faith.

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# Introduction

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Since the Enlightenment, predictions of religion's demise have been common, yet religion still exhibits an enormous influence in the world today, with 84% of all people worldwide affiliated with a faith of some sort (Pew Research Center, 2012), and with the United States being one of the most religious developed countries in the world. Even though this prediction has not yet borne out, those predicting the death of religion can point to a number of compelling statistics suggesting that religion is in decline in the United States and elsewhere. However, like many social phenomena, the picture of religion's evolving place in the world is complex and resists simple soundbites. For example, people who leave religious identity often retain religious beliefs, and though leaving faith is popularly seen as a one-and-done phenomenon, the fact is that many people who leave faith return—even leaving and returning again several times over the course of their life—and any discussion of faith needs to incorporate this reality.

The topic of disaffiliation is often leveraged into polemical arguments, including those that are critical of religion, but the effects of faith on the individual and society are multifaceted. Because of this complexity, most academic treatments of the issue of religious disaffiliation consider one very narrow aspect of the phenomenon among many. In this report, we take a 30,000-foot view on the issue while sticking to the empirical evidence and avoiding ideologically charged, sweeping narratives, specifically addressing what the data and academic literature says about those who disaffiliate from religion:

- how many are leaving
- who is leaving
- which faiths are most impacted
- the personal and social consequences of disaffiliation
- how many people return to faith

While there is much to be said about these issues and trends across the world, and while this report does occasionally touch on data and research collected in an international context, here we focus specifically on the United States.

## How Many Are Leaving Faith?

While conversion *toward* religion has been studied for a long time, examining the phenomenon of moving *away* from religion, or what is referred to as *deconversion*, is a relatively new field of study. Deconversion can take a variety of forms, such as ceasing to identify with a faith altogether (becoming a “none”) or reducing the frequency of church attendance while still maintaining some level of religious affiliation or identity.

While the decline of religion is a perennial theme in public discourse, and predictions of the death of religion are centuries old, the fact of the matter is that the world as a whole is actually becoming more religious (Pew Research Center, 2015b). Increasing world

religiosity is a case of Simpson’s paradox, where trends that appear in several groups of data actually reverse when the datasets are combined. Although most countries are becoming less religious on an individual level, the global population is increasingly concentrated in more religious regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where birth rates are higher. As a result, despite the trend that most countries are becoming less religious, the world is in fact becoming more religious in the aggregate.

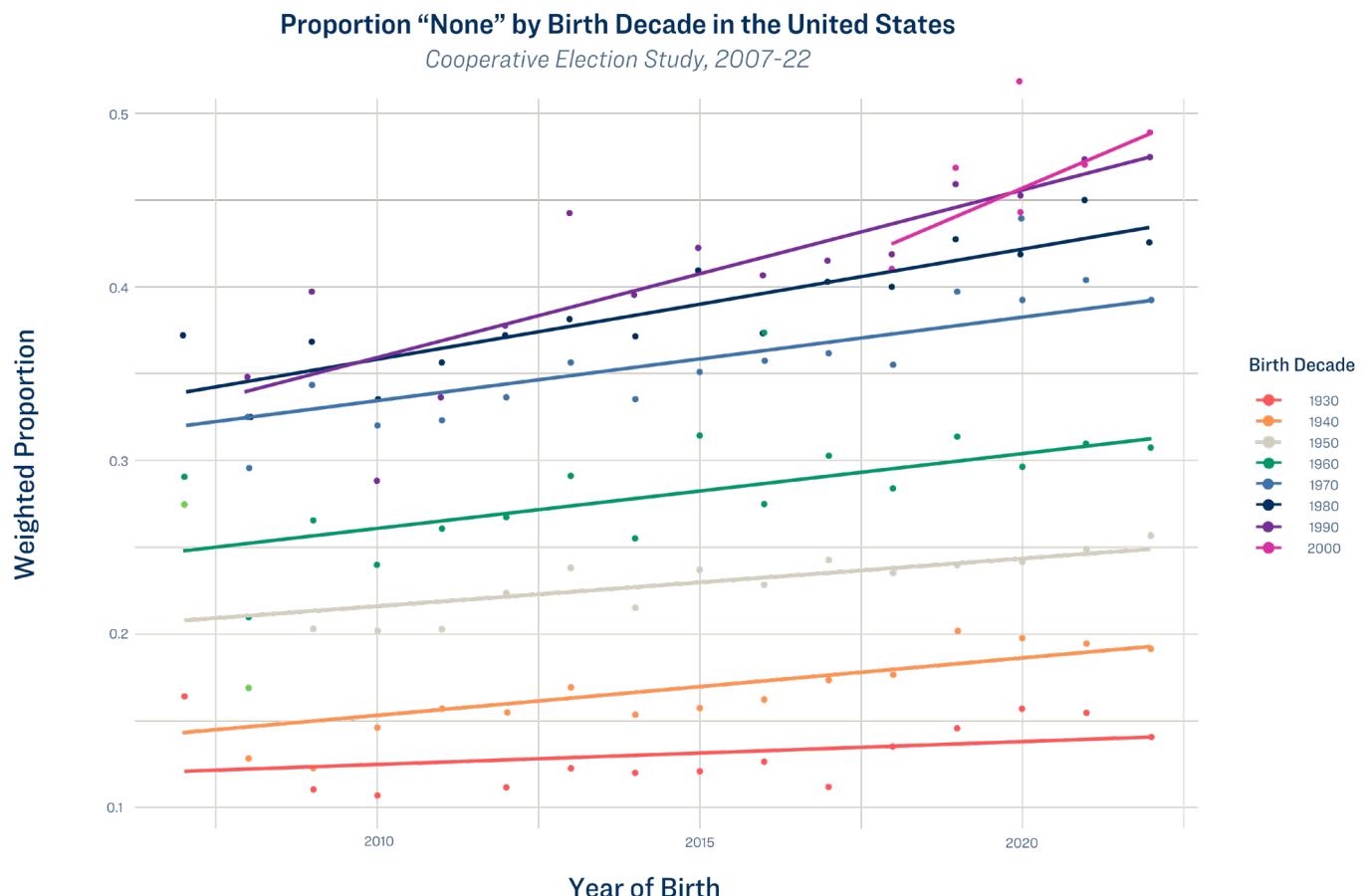
**“While the decline of religion is a perennial theme in public discourse, and predictions of the death of religion are centuries old, the fact of the matter is that the world as a whole is actually becoming more religious.”**

Yet still the fact remains that in America and other developed countries, deconversion is a salient, ongoing phenomenon: people are leaving religion. The proportion of religious “nones” in the United States, while still a minority of adults (approximately 3 out of 10), has been growing rapidly: one decade ago 2 out of 10 Americans were “nones,” and three decades ago only about 1 in 20 were “nones” (Public Religion Research Institute, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2022). Some of the increase in the number of “nones” is due to adults leaving faith as they age. However, by far most of the decline in faith is simply the result of younger generations being less religious. For example, millennials are less religious than Gen Xers, and Gen Zers are less religious than millennials—and as these more secular generations age and take the place of the more religious older cohorts, the United States as a whole becomes less religious.

To visually demonstrate this, we use the Cooperative Election Study, a survey of more than 50,000 people taken every year since 2005 that allows us to track not only how many people in a generation are leaving faith as they age, but also how religiosity differs among generations.

When the proportion of people who do not identify with a religion is evaluated by decade of birth and tracked across time, the following conclusions become clear:

1. Each generation is becoming less religious across time. Although the proportion of “nones” increases with each generation, it should be noted that some return to religion as well. However, given that the percentage of those leaving religion is higher than the percentage returning, there is an overall increase in the percentage of “nones” for each generation.
2. Although the proportion of “nones” in each cohort is increasing across time, the primary reason for the overall increase is that people in younger cohorts are simply less religious to begin with. This more than anything else is what accounts for the decline in religiosity for the population as a whole. For example, the proportion of “nones” for those born in 1950 increases from around the low 20s in 2007 to the mid-20s in 2022. However, the proportion of “nones” for those born in 2000 starts at the low 40s in 2007 and grows to the high 40s by 2022.



“Nones” are sometimes assumed to be nonbelieving atheists, but in reality a significant portion of “nones” actually hold to some kind of religious belief or exhibit religious behavior; they simply do not identify with any particular religion. As noted by one researcher, “If we put five Nones in a room, one would be an atheist, one would be agnostic, and three would be nothing in particular”

(Burge & Michel, 2023), with about three in ten “nones” still believing in hell (Nortey et al., 2021).

Not identifying with a particular religion does not necessarily mean a lack of belief. It is likely that much of the trend toward disaffiliation is linked to the decline of people in Western countries belonging to any institution, be it the Boy Scouts, marriage, the PTA, or bowling leagues (Chaves, 2000).

**“Not identifying with a particular religion does not necessarily mean a lack of belief.”**

While the United States is a relatively religious country given its level of wealth, religious identification in the US is declining. With such a sharp increase in “nones,” is there a floor to how far religiosity will drop in the United States? Will this trend continue until there are very few individuals who identify with a religion, or will it stabilize at a certain point? The experiences of other countries can be informative. Even in highly developed, highly secular countries like Norway or Estonia, most people still maintain some level of religious affiliation. There are only a small number of countries, ones that are typically communist and officially atheist such as Vietnam or China, where a vast majority of people are “nones” (Pew Research Center, 2018). While the United States is arguably on its way to European-level irreligiosity, it is very rare for religion to completely disappear from the scene, and most projections show the rate of irreligiosity leveling off in the US over the next few decades (Pew Research Center, 2022). In fact, some evidence suggests that this plateau has already started, with the share of “nones” remaining steady in the past several years (Burge, 2024).

## Who Stays? Who Goes?

While there is a massive amount of literature on those who are not religious, this is related but conceptually distinct from those who are leaving religion. For example, causation can go in the direction of religion influencing people to adopt certain characteristics. Also, less-religious people may have always been less religious, and this lifelong lack of faith can also be associated with a variety of characteristics. There are several personal characteristics that have been investigated to see if they are associated with people being less religious or leaving faith.

## Age

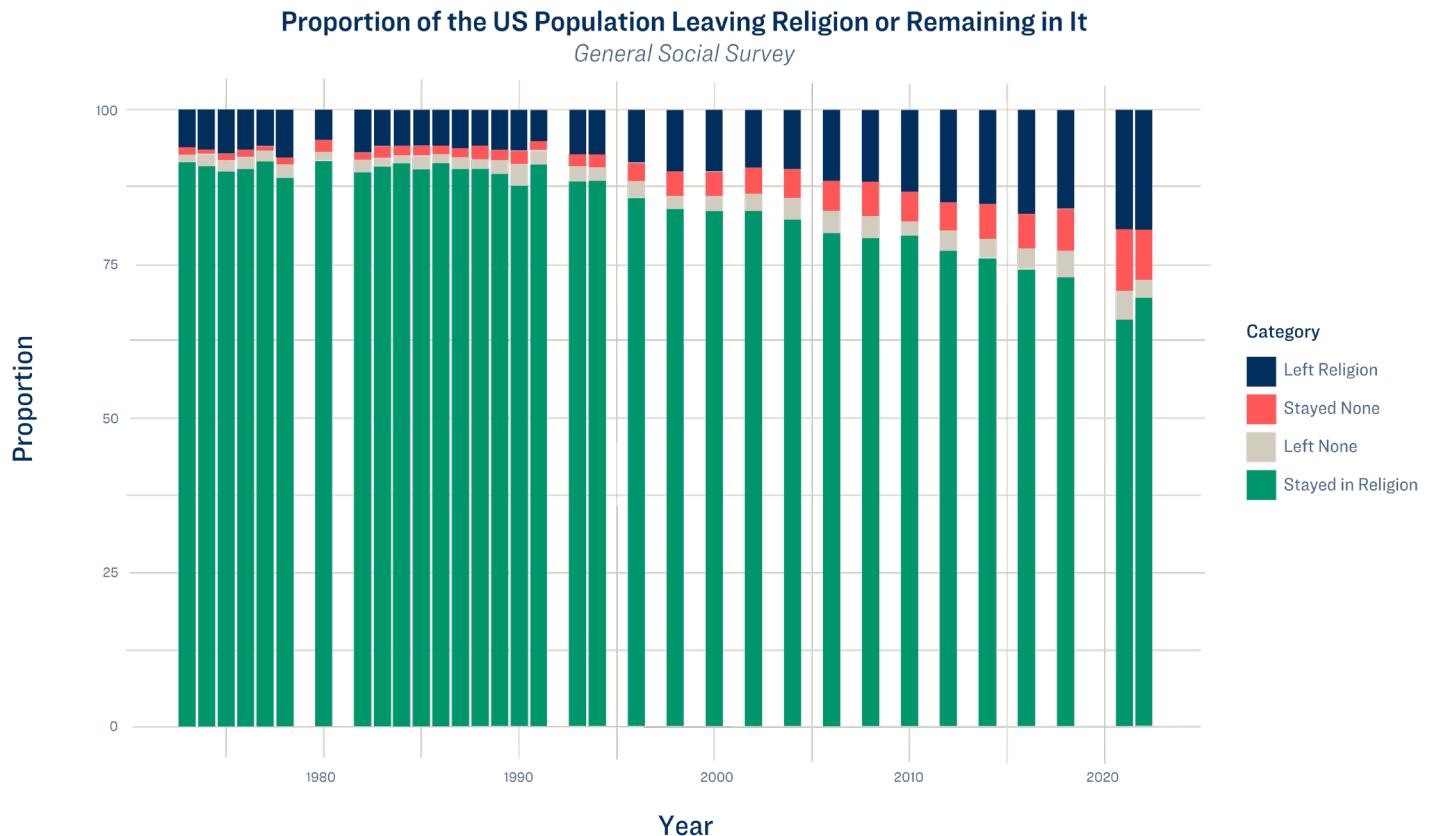
The bulk of research on deconversion deals specifically with the sensitive period after high school when young adults are less attached to their parents and are more capable of making their own lifestyle and religious decisions. This is a time of significant religious change. The National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR) tracked individuals from their teens to early 20s. Between the ages of 13 and 17, about 16% of individuals identified as “nones,” but this number increased to 27% when this same group reached 18–23 years old (Smith & Snell, 2009). This and other evidence suggests that the trend toward irreligion starts before legal adulthood. In the 1980s only 10% of high school seniors identified as “nones,” but by the 2010s this figure had doubled and has probably continued to rise since then (Twenge et al., 2015).

Does the shift toward religious disaffiliation mean that youth are leaving religions at a higher rate or that they were never deeply religious to begin with (identifying with a religion but lacking real connection)? The answer appears to be both. Most surveys deal with adults who are 18 or older, however, there have been some studies on youth prior to age 18, and there does appear to be a decline in religiosity across the teenage years. For example, one study tracking a sample of approximately 489 adolescents from ages 12 to 19 found a decline in different measures of religiosity as the teens aged. At age 12, the youth had an average church attendance of 2.83 on a 7-point scale, indicating participation in religious services a little less than “once a month.” At the age of 19, their average religious service attendance was 1.6—between “a few times” and “several times” in the preceding 12 months (Dyer et al., 2022). While young people may leave faith abruptly once they leave home, for many individuals that process starts long before and continues to operate throughout their adolescence.

## Upbringing

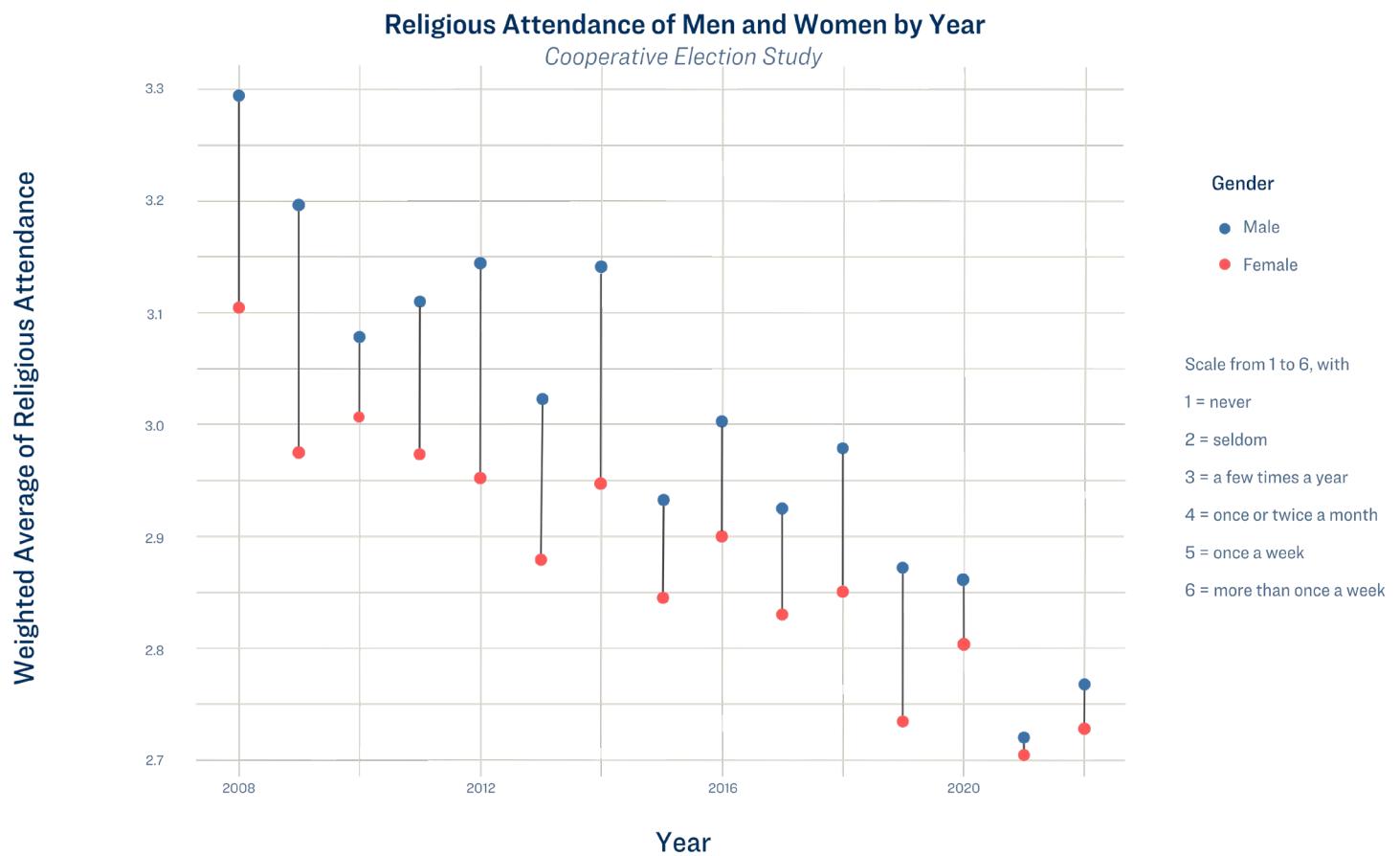
There is some evidence that more people today are being raised without religion compared to prior generations, even though the ranks of the irreligious still largely come from people who deconverted from faith. Every year the large General Social Survey asks respondents (1) what religion they were raised in and (2) what religion they currently identify with. By analyzing trends in these responses across time, we can see that an increasing share of Americans were raised with a religion but no longer identify with one. However, the number of adults identifying as “none” who were not raised with a faith to begin with is also increasing, from low single digits in the 1980s and 1990s to double digits by the 2020s. By far most of the increase in “nones” is from those who left a religious upbringing, while the percentage of those converting to religion after being raised without one has remained relatively consistent over the past 20 years (also in the single digits).

However, the majority of Americans—around 7 in 10—were raised with a religion and still identify with one, even though this group is rapidly shrinking from a high of 9 in 10 in the 1980s. As noted above, much of this change is cohort-specific, with more recent cohorts much less likely than average to identify as religious once they are adults.



## Gender

There is extensive empirical research showing that, at least in the context of developed Western countries, women are more likely to be religious than men (Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2016). Since the gender distribution of children born to religious and nonreligious parents is roughly equal, we can assume that this difference in religiosity is from men leaving religion at a higher rate than women. However, there is some evidence suggesting that these differences are narrowing. When we use the same Cooperative Election Study to look at the gap in religious attendance between men and women by year, we see that the gaps since 2020 have narrowed and that there is even one year when men were more religious than women. This is a scale from 1 to 6, with 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = a few times a year, 4 = once or twice a month, 5 = once a week, 6 = more than once a week.



## Sexual Orientation

There is a similarly extensive literature showing that members of sexual minorities are less likely to be religious (Sherkat, 2017). Sexual orientation is often seen as a combination of biological etiology and agentic self-identification (Diamond, 2021). Since it can be assumed that a biological proclivity toward homosexuality or bisexuality is likely randomly distributed across both religious and nonreligious families, it then follows that the lower religiosity among sexual minorities is due to higher rates of leaving religion. However, vibrant religiosity does exist even among sexual minority communities; one report from the Williams Institute at UCLA reports that nearly half of LGBTQ adults are religious to some extent, while in South Carolina nearly 3 out of 4 LGBTQ adults are religious (Conron et al., 2020).

## **Personality**

While there are trends in personality differences between religious and nonreligious people, it is unclear whether religiosity influences personality changes or whether one's personality predisposes some people to be more inclined toward religion—or both. The literature on this is sparser and still in its early stages. However, a variety of studies have found that myriad traits such as honesty, humility, social incompetency, social anxiety, identity insecurity, and emotional instability have all been shown to significantly predict deconversion (Hardy & Taylor, 2024).

## **Political Affiliation**

The literature on the relationship between religiosity and politics is vast, but most research focuses on how religion influences political behavior, specifically on how people's religious backgrounds, beliefs, and identities shape their political leanings. While Republicans are generally more religious than Democrats, the question arises: does identifying as a Republican make one less likely to leave their faith? Research suggests that this is the case, with numerous studies showing that secularization in the United States has primarily happened among Democrats and Independents (Burge, 2023). It's not just that Democrats have always been more secular but also that they have moved away from religion at a faster pace than Republicans.

## **Education**

A common argument in secularization theory is that education leads people to become less religious. Some suggest that religion declines when, in their view, the light of reason and science is shined on superstition. But is this assumption true? Does education really lead to a loss of faith? There is some research that has examined differences in educational requirements across regions to rigorously test for the causal effects of education on religiosity, and this literature has generally found that education does, in fact, have a religiosity-dampening effect (Liang & Dong, 2019; Özer et al., 2024). However, the research that tracks people across time without focusing solely on geography-level religiosity and education tends to suggest the opposite: that people who go through college are less likely to leave faith than their counterparts who do not attend college (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011; Smith & Snell, 2009). The effects of schooling on faith are complex and are likely influenced by peer interactions along with what is learned in class, both of which shape one's personal worldview.

## **Family Relationships**

In terms of family dynamics, those who grow up in less-religious families are more likely to leave religion (Perry & Longest, 2019). Also, those who have poor family relationships are more likely to deconvert (Longo & Kim-Spoon, 2014).

Relatedly, parents who employ either authoritarian, high-pressure parenting or permissive, low-pressure parenting both tend to have more children who leave their family faith than parents who use a balance of warmth and structure (Hardy & Taylor, 2024).

### **Other Factors**

There are also other characteristics associated with religiosity, like race and immigration status, but very little literature has looked at whether these characteristics are predictive of leaving or simply descriptive of those with a less-religious background. On a more detailed level, one study using twin data actually finds evidence of a large genetic component in determining who leaves and who stays (Freeman, 2019).

### **Stages of Deconversion**

Beyond empirical associations, there is also more phenomenological work that attempts to explore the experience of deconversion and see it in its own terms—to explain the feelings, stories, and sentiments associated with leaving faith. While deconversion stories vary widely and are often unique, some researchers have hypothesized that there are various stages of deconversion. Again, not everybody who leaves a religion goes through them, and which specific stages are emphasized vary from model to model, but they often include similar themes (Hardy & Taylor, 2024):

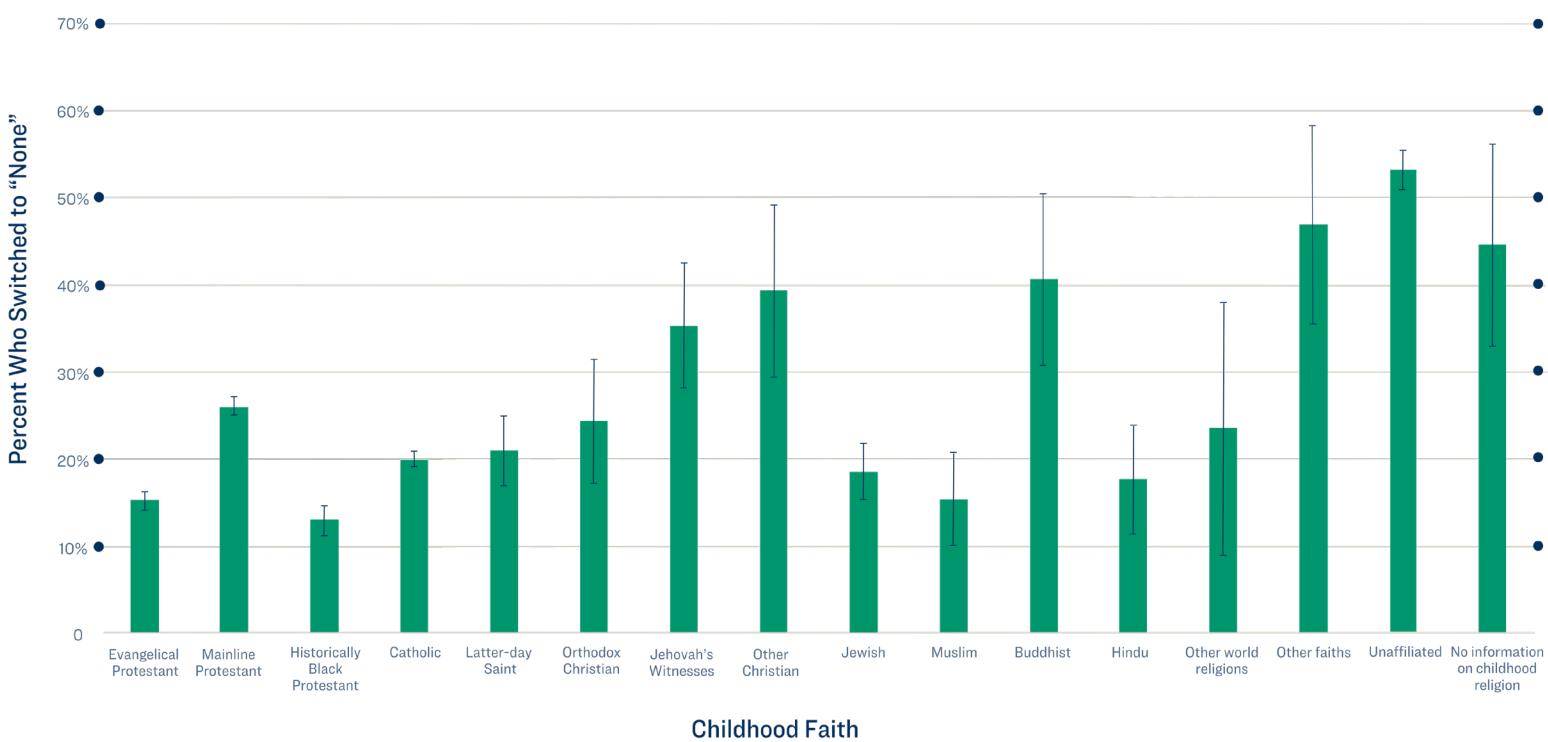
- a faith struggle, when individuals start to question their beliefs
- interactions with believers and religious institutions during their struggle, some of which may be negative
- emotional difficulties as they transition away from religion
- formal disaffiliation from their religious community

Some research has also looked at self-reported reasons for leaving religion, with individuals citing factors such as feeling unaccepted in their faith, encountering intolerance, experiencing shame, and having doubts about religious beliefs (Heft & Stats, 2021). Some of the self-reported reasons are, understandably, context dependent. This is a potentially fruitful area of future research. While past research has relied on qualitative self-report, future studies could supplement the current, more subjective findings with a more quantitative, objective approach.

## Which Faiths Are Most Impacted?

Are some faiths losing more members to irreligion than others? In 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted a large survey that asked not only what faith respondents currently identified with but also which faith they were raised in, casting light on whether some groups lose more of their children to irreligion than others. (It is worth noting, however, that this measure only captures whether individuals currently identify as nonreligious. It does not, for example, account for those who may have simply switched religions, which represents another phenomenon).

**“None” in Adulthood by Childhood Faith**  
2014 Pew Religious Landscape Survey



When broken down by group, it is clear that members of some religious traditions retain their children more effectively than others. For example, members of mainline Protestant faith traditions, such as the Episcopalians—typically characterized by predominantly white, highly educated congregations that are known for their liberal theological and social perspectives—lose approximately a quarter of their young adherents to irreligion. In contrast, historically Black Protestant traditions experience lower rates of disaffiliation, with numbers in the low teens, while over one-third of people raised as Jehovah's Witnesses are now irreligious.

Interestingly, nonreligious families similarly “lose” a lot of their children to religion, with nearly half of individuals who were raised without a faith tradition now identifying with one. Still, the fact that so many tributaries are emptying into the stream of the unaffiliated means that, in the aggregate, “nones” are growing, even if they are still a minority. (Although, as noted above, this growth may have plateaued, and the unaffiliated may yet remain a minority. Pew Research Center, 2015a). It is worth noting that the long-term growth of different religions is not based solely on people leaving or joining but also on birth rates of their adherents, with those in some traditions such as mainline Protestantism simply having fewer children (Hout et al., 2001). Though The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints loses about as many youths as other denominations, their higher-than-average birth rates and a robust proselytizing program mean that they are doing relatively better at retention, even if their percentage of the entire US population is still marginally declining (Cranney, 2023; Riess, 2021). Additionally, larger families in the past contribute to more current growth due to a phenomenon called population momentum. While this concept is beyond the scope of this article, it’s worth noting that some of the current growth in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stems from its past generations with larger families, and this additional source of growth will eventually taper off as larger families from earlier generations pass away.

## Consequences of Disaffiliation

Due to religion’s positive effects on both individuals and societies, the growing trend of religious disaffiliation carries significant negative implications for individual health and well-being, familial relationships, community cohesion, and demographic stability.

### Health and Well-Being

There is a vast body of research on cross-sectional associations between religiosity and various well-being and health outcomes (Koenig & Carson, 2012). In general, those who remain religiously affiliated have been shown to be healthier and happier than those who have left religion. The literature that traces the direct relationship between deconversion and its impact on individuals as they leave faith is rarer, but still existent. For example, one study using the pooled General Social Survey data (1973–2012) showed that those who disaffiliated from a religion experienced poorer health and well-being due to reduced church participation, suggesting that the loss of healthy social and group connections contributes to a decline in well-being among those who leave religion (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016).

**“Due to religion’s positive effects on both individuals and societies, the growing trend of religious disaffiliation carries significant negative implications for individual health and well-being, familial relationships, community cohesion, and demographic stability.”**

The importance of these church-related networks and ties is a frequent theme in the more qualitative work on the subject (Nica, 2019, 2020; Testoni et al., 2019).

However, an international study that tracked 188 Chinese Protestant Christians who left their faith found mixed results: about half showed signs of improved well-being after leaving, while the other half showed a decline. Those with low well-being prior to leaving their faith were more likely to experience a further decline after disaffiliation (Hui et al., 2018). Additionally, one large prospective cohort study that followed multiple groups across time showed that declines in health and health behaviors associated with leaving were happening before people formally stopped attending religious services. This suggests that the relationship between well-being and church attendance itself is not straightforward and could be more correlational than causal (Jokela & Laakasuo, 2023). It may also be that those with lower well-being have a more difficult time connecting with religion. While less-religious people consistently exhibit lower well-being, pinpointing the exact causal mechanisms has proven difficult due to the complexity of timing and other factors

### **Changes in Character**

Research on changes in well-being after deconversion has largely been based on small-sample studies, but one large-N study from New Zealand that tracked 31,604 individuals (including 540 converts and 886 deconverts) found “increases in Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism following conversion. [They] also observed increases in Honesty-Humility and decreases in Agreeableness preceding deconversion. These findings indicate that religious conversion initiates specific changes in character, the most pronounced of which relate to increases in modesty and greed-avoidance” (Stronge et al., 2020, p. 801).

### **Social Implications**

Changes in people when they deconvert percolate upward until they impact society at large. Research showing that religious people are more prosocial is reinforced by longitudinal analyses indicating that people who leave faith become less committed to the binding, communitarian moral principles of ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and concerns for purity than when they were religious (Van Tongeren et al., 2021b). This suggests that there are certain prosocial characteristics associated with being religious that gradually weaken as one spends more time outside of faith.

Interestingly, even after people disaffiliate from religion, some religious norms and values continue to influence their lives (at least temporarily), a phenomenon researchers call the religious residue effect.

This persistent influence of religion even following a break from faith has been shown to operate for other value schemas such as Schwartz's Circle of Values, which systematically categorize people's moral outlooks and priorities (Schwadel et al., 2021).

In more concrete terms, people who leave their faith still give to charities at higher rates than those who were never religious, again suggesting a residual effect on behavior that extends beyond their self-reported values (Van Tongeren et al., 2021a). When people leave faith, they often carry its habits and values with them, at least for a time.

### **Emotional and Relational Distress**

The act of leaving religion can have a profound emotional impact, often affecting both personal well-being and relationships. Various studies suggest that some of the distress associated with disaffiliation stems from tension with more-religious family members (Hwang et al., 2018), leading to strain, conflicts, and in extreme cases, even complete estrangement (Knight et al., 2019). Individuals may still exhibit a fear of hell, even if they no longer consciously believe in it (Cranney et al., 2018) and may demonstrate anger toward their former faith and its teachings. However, the emotional impact of disaffiliation is not all negative: some qualitative research has shown that deconversion can also be accompanied by feelings of liberation and freedom from religious strictures (see Lee & Gubi, 2019), providing an opportunity to reshape one's identity.

### **Declining Birth Rates**

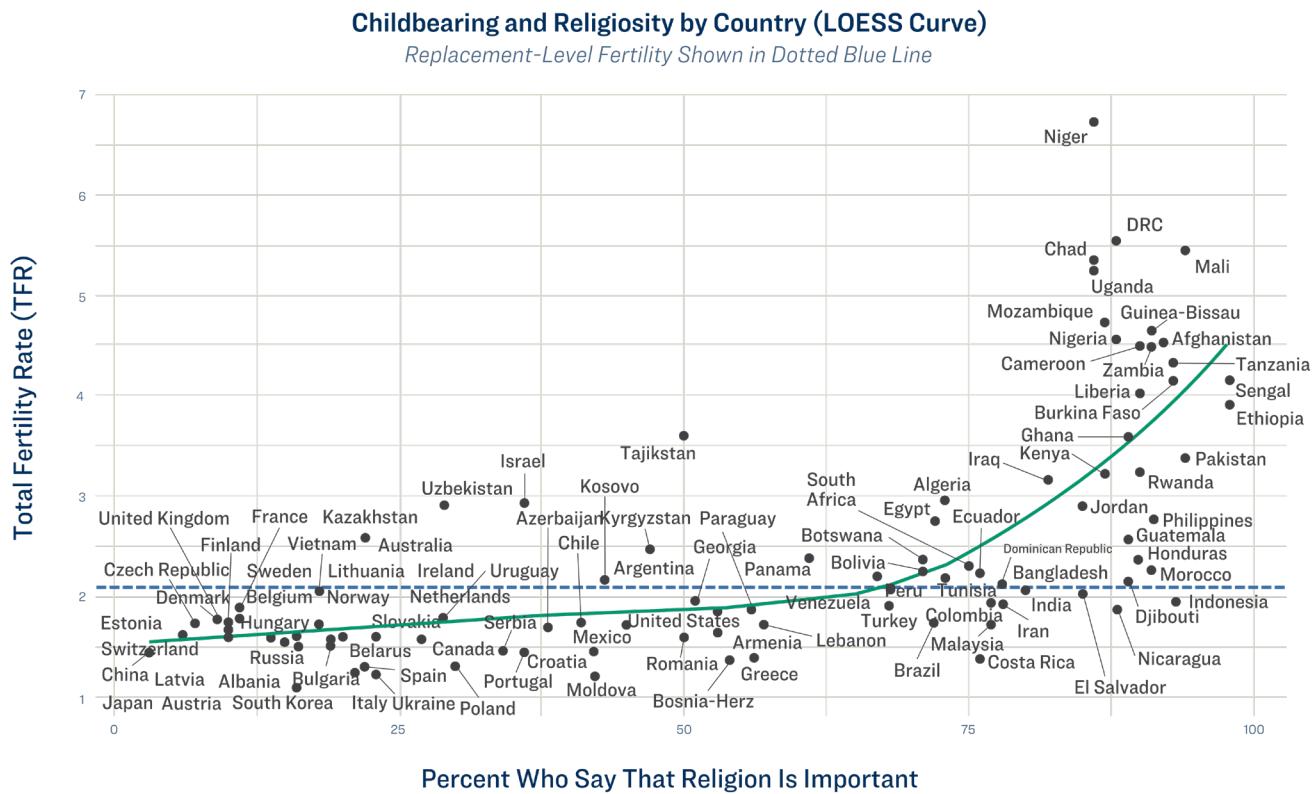
Religion's influence on individual behavior can have a broader effect on society and demographic stability. For example, research consistently shows that religious people have more children and express a desire for larger families (DeRose, 2021). This desire for more children is seen among individuals across various religious dimensions, including among otherwise nonreligious people who believe in God (Cranney, 2015).

**“Secular societies are simply not replacing themselves. Apparently humanity’s survival requires at least some religiosity.”**

This relationship between childbearing and societal religiosity is apparent on a global scale. Because religious societies tend to be poorer, the fact that within the same country more religious people have more children suggests that differences in birth rates between countries is in large part due to differences in faith. The decline in childbearing and, consequently, in the working age population will have catastrophic effects for economies around the world (Goodkind, 2024; McCartney, 2024).

In order for a country to maintain a stable population without growth or decline, each woman must have an average of 2.1 children, a replacement rate demarcated with a dotted blue line in this chart.

When fertility rates are simply plotted against a country's religiosity (as measured by the percentage who say that religion is important in their life), a clear pattern emerges: countries that reach this crucial replacement rate are, almost as a rule, religious, with solid majorities considering religion very important. Secular societies are simply not replacing themselves. Apparently humanity's survival requires at least some religiosity.



## Lower Marriage Rates

Secularization also impacts other macrolevel demographic behaviors, including marriage. In our own original analysis of the 2022 Cooperative Election Study in the United States, fewer than 2 out of 8 people who attend religious services more than once a week are never married, whereas for people who never go to religious services, it is approximately 3 out of 8. This difference remains significant even when controlling for age. Consequently, the decline in religiosity not only affects marriage but also leads to lower marital rates. Therefore, as the United States becomes more secular, we can expect a growing number of unmarried and never-married individuals.

Because it is well established that marriage offers various benefits for individuals, including longer and happier lives and better physical and mental health (Lawrence et al., 2019), lower marriage rates may have inversely negative consequences.

## Reconversion: Who Comes Back and Why?

While there is extensive research on deconversion, much less attention has been given to “reconversion,” the process of returning to a faith after having left it, despite evidence that this is a widespread phenomenon. Indeed, a 2024 Pew Research Center study reported that for the first time in decades there was a decrease in those who identified as religious “nones.” A 2016 Pew report noted that “the vast majority of . . . religious ‘Nones’ (78%) say they were raised as a member of a particular religion before shedding their religious identity in adulthood” (Lipka, 2016). Such persons are often called “dones” (e.g., “done with religion”); however, this can be a misnomer because some “dones” do end up returning to religion, becoming what we call reconverts. These tides away from faith and back to it raise important questions we will address in this portion of the report, including: (1) What percentage of “dones” reconvert to religion? (2) When do reconverts return? and (3) Why do they return?

As to the percent of self-identified “dones” who reconvert, research on the frequency of religious reconversion is relatively limited compared to research on religious conversion or deconversion. A review of several studies from past decades indicates that the prevailing view about 30 years ago was that departures from religion were typically “short-lived” (Wilson & Sherkat, 1994, p. 151), perhaps reflecting a phase some adolescents and young adults experience (Hoge, 1988). However, as noted above regarding trends in rates of religious deconversion, the religious landscape has shifted significantly in recent decades. What do recent data sources reveal about rates of religious reconversion?

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health tracked more than 15,000 young people across three waves, examining those who scored high or moderate on religiosity in adolescence (Time 1) but then low on religiosity by emerging adulthood (Time 2). Of those who had dropped from high or moderate religiosity to low, about 1 in 6 (17.4%) returned to high or moderate religiosity by early adulthood (Time 3; Uecker et al., 2016).

Another longitudinal study by the Family Foundations of Youth Development (<https://foundations.byu.edu/>) tracked roughly 1,300 youth from Utah and Arizona in 2018, about 84% of whom initially identified as religious.<sup>1</sup> Roughly 10% of these religious youth disaffiliated within two years, but almost 1 in 5 (19%) of the disaffiliates returned after another two years (Hess, 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> About 63% were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

A 2015 Pew report focused on Catholic membership reported a very similar return rate even extending into later adulthood, noting that “about one-in-five [adults in the church are] people who left the church for a while and have since returned” (Pew Research Center, 2015c).

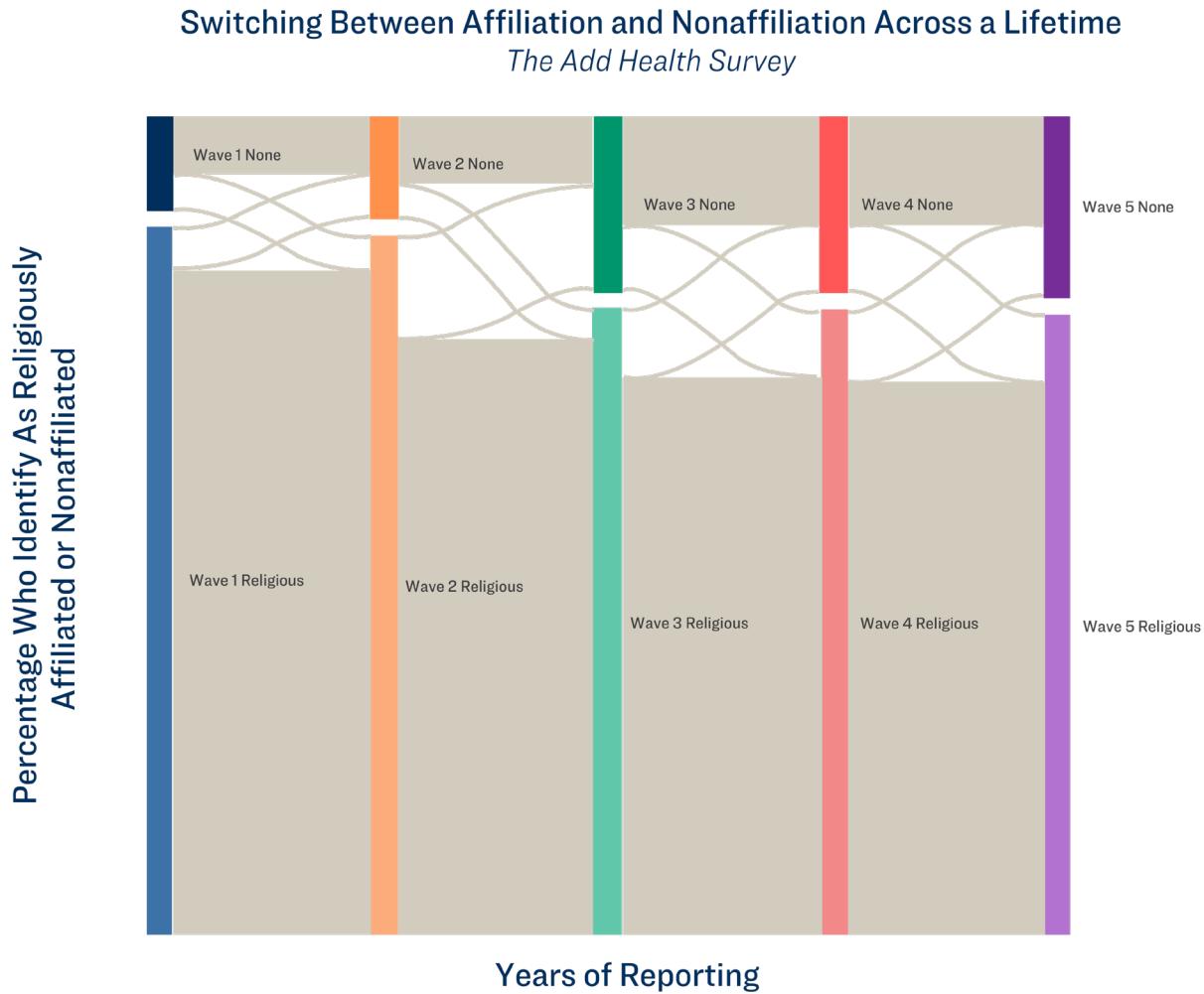
The National Study of Youth and Religion evaluated over 3,000 US teens from 2002 to 2013. From Wave 1 to Wave 2, 14% left religion, but 40% of those reconverted to religion by Wave 3, and 51% of those were still religious at Wave 4. Thus, according to Hardy and Taylor (2024), 20% of “dones” reconverted and stayed for at least a few years. In the summer of 2023, Hardy collected retrospective data on religious trajectories from a nationally representative sample of 2,030 US adults. He estimated that about 30% of those who grew up religious had left their religion at some point, but 27% of those who disaffiliated eventually reconverted.

In summary, while it may have been accurate 30 to 35 years ago to assert that “*a majority of [those who leave religion will] return at some time later*” (Hoge, 1988, p. 96, emphasis added), four recent studies indicate early adulthood reconversion rates of 17.4%, 19%, 20%, and 27%. These “return rates” reflect a substantial minority but fall short of the majority projected a generation or two ago. Even so, a person’s faith trajectory is far from settled by the time that person reaches emerging or early adulthood.

**“A person’s faith trajectory is far from settled by the time that person reaches emerging or early adulthood.”**



In our own original analysis, we examined the wave-to-wave religious trajectories of students in the Add Health Survey, one of the most prominent, long-term surveys in the United States. This survey followed a cohort of students who were in middle and high school during the 1994–95 academic year. Every couple of years, the students were surveyed about their religious affiliation, allowing us to track the stability of identifying as a religious “none” over time.



Tracking this particular cohort shows that by far most of the transition from religion to irreligion happened between Wave 2 (1996) and Wave 3 (2001–2), or the period after high school when they transitioned to young adulthood. After that initial, critical stage of leaving faith, people flow into faith at about the same rate they flow out.

Equally important as understanding how many “dones” return to religion is the question of when they return. The prevailing view in sociology 35 years ago emphasized three key factors that seemed to encourage a return to religion: (1) strong, warm ties with one’s family of origin; (2) marriage; and (3) marital childbearing (Albrecht et al., 1988; Roof, 1990; see also Wilson & Sherkat, 1994).

In a landmark study of religious transmission spanning 35 years with a sample of over 3,000 individuals, Bengtson and colleagues reported that “the most successful parents in religious transmission showed love, respect, and patience for those children who took a different path in religion; these [children were more likely to have] . . . returned” (2013, p. 186).<sup>2</sup> The researchers warned against “judgment and preaching” and emphasized that “in almost every case [where children returned to the family faith] we found that their parents had been patient and supportive—and perhaps more tolerant and open than they had been before the [child’s] departure” (2013, pp. 197, 189). If warm, relational ties with one’s family of origin were considered a key factor in returning to religion, marriage also played a significant role. As Roof (1990) observed, “Married persons . . . are far more likely . . . to have returned to active religious participation” (p. 286). Wilson and Sherkat additionally noted that “starting a family of one’s own seems to be an especially powerful pull [back] to the church” (1994, p. 151). In summary, 30 to 35 years ago pursuing a conventional path of marriage and then having children seemed to be associated with a return to religion for many former “dones.”

As we move closer to the present, however, some shifts have occurred. Some of the best studies published in the last decade or so indicate that while marriage still corresponds with a return for some, it is not as strong a factor as parenthood (Uecker et al., 2016). Further, while the birth of a child may prompt some parents to return to religion for sacred rituals surrounding birth—such as naming ceremonies, baptisms, bris ceremonies, or baby blessings—the highest rates of return to religion occur among “parents with school-aged children . . . who have them during normative childbearing ages” (Uecker et al., 2016, p. 386). Another study from the last decade suggests that it is having school-age children—not marriage or childbearing alone—that seems to significantly increase church attendance (Schleifer & Chaves, 2017).

**“...the most successful parents in religious transmission showed love, respect, and patience for those children who took a different path in religion.”**

<sup>2</sup> A similar finding was noted 20 years earlier by Wilson and Sherkat, who reported, “A warm and close relation to parents has a lasting impact. Children who were close to their parents while in high school not only are less likely to rebel, but are more likely to return if they do [rebel]” (1994, p. 155).

An increase in religious returners has also been observed among unmarried or divorced single parents. Uecker et al. (2016) reported that the group of young adults most likely to return to weekly church attendance were single parents. Indeed, about one-third of this group returned. This finding prompted the researchers to conclude that currently “there appear to be at least two pathways to religious return via family formation—a single-parent path . . . and the ‘traditional’ married (with children) path” (2016, pp. 400–401). Whether parents are single or married, however, the pull to return to religion seems to be strongest among those who grew up religious, left their faith, and then feel drawn back to religion during parenthood (Uecker et al., 2016).

Some leading researchers in this area tend to frame parents’ return to religion as part of a larger lifestyle change and shift in priorities (Uecker et al., 2016). These changes may especially impact fathers (Petts, 2007; see also Palkovitz, 2002).

In their longitudinal study, Bengtson et al. emphasized, “Today’s youth will not stay young for long. . . . If church seems irrelevant to a nineteen-year-old, that might change for her as she becomes a mother of school-age children or a seventy-three-year-old widow when the social support of a congregation may become increasingly important. Some [children who leave their parents’ faith] return, even if many years later” (2013, p. 203).<sup>3</sup>

The question of why those who were once “dones” return to faith remains open, whether they come back during their teens or emerging adulthood, after marriage and the transition to parenthood, when their children hit school age, or even much later in life. Hardy and Taylor recently issued the call that much more “research is needed examining religious reconversion,” noting that, “with a growing population of potential reconverts, the importance of studying processes of religious reconversion increases” (2024, p. 16).

As we consider future directions for research on reconversion, perhaps the most pressing question is: *Why do they return?* Uecker et al. (2016, pp. 386–387) offer four probable reasons:

1. Religious explanations: Parents may seek religious training for their children.
2. Social explanations: Returning to faith may be tied to building relationships in the context of marriage and child-rearing.
3. Practical explanations: Churches offer practical benefits like “babysitting, parenting classes, discussion groups, . . . daycare,” and informal parenting support from others in the congregation.
4. Cultural explanations: “Churches are important . . . social networks that keep the practice of marriage alive” (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, p. 583).

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<sup>3</sup> Bengtson himself returned later in life (Bengtson et al., 2013, p. xi).

Recent exploratory, qualitative research involving 100 reconversion stories from returning members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints offers additional possibilities beyond the reasons documented above. Discussing the trajectories of reconverts, D'Evegnée and D'Evegnée summarized,

The[ir] narratives begin with some kind of misalignment between a person's private religious feelings and public religious practices or beliefs regarding church attendance, fulfilling callings, service projects, and so on. . . . However, in almost every narrative, the reconversion process focuses on a new or rekindled relationship with God. These intense feelings of unconditional love seemed to offer our narrators permission to believe they could change, that they could rewrite their story. . . . The most important determining factor in . . . returning . . . is a personal relationship with God. (2023, pp. 199, 124)

In a similar vein, another recent qualitative, exploratory study of 37 diverse religious returners by Zurcher et al. (2023, p. 210) reported that “none of our participants mentioned specific resources produced by religious organizations as foundational to the resolution of their faith crisis. Rather, participants focused on how their reconnection with God came through intimate, individualized, and spiritual experiences as opposed to larger organizational messages.”

Further, in the Zurcher et al. study (2023, p. 211), four patterns or types were identified among participants:

1. “*Resilient God seekers*, [who] . . . did not understand the reasons behind the difficulties they faced, [but came to believe] their struggles were part of God’s larger plan.”
2. “*Self-compassionates*, [who] frequently discovered God’s unconditional love for them and their loved ones during their faith crisis.”
3. “*Marathon runners*, [who] considered themselves deeply independent individuals who chose to manage their faith struggles and doubts privately.”
4. “*Scripture seekers*, [who] . . . resolved their faith crisis through scripture study, prayer, and by obtaining advice and comfort through and from their religious leaders and community.”

Both of these recent studies highlight personal, existential, and psychological reasons for returning, in addition to the well-documented, life course factors of marriage and childbearing outlined previously. Another factor behind potentially returning, as recently noted by Cranney’s research involving Latter-day Saints, is that a “done” who is married to a person of the religion that they left tends to be more open to returning (Riess, 2024).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>. An excerpt reads: “Cranney performed a regression analysis to see if he could isolate predictive factors that might shed light on which former Latter-day Saints were most likely to return to church. ‘The one thing that is associated with being more likely to say that you’ll return to the church is if you are married to a member,’ he said” (Riess, 2024).

Survey data expert Ryan Burge (2023b) has noted, “The way that the average American changes religion is slow, steady, and undramatic.” However, the age of social media has launched decisions regarding religion that were historically private into the public domain. Leaving a faith “loudly” and dramatically is not unusual. Is the typical reconvert also likely to return “loudly,” or are most cases “slow, steady, and undramatic”? We suspect that influential public figures with various agendas have overshadowed the limited science to this point. “Unfortunately,” note Hardy and Taylor in their recent review, “no significant [large-scale] research exists on processes of reconversion” (2024, p. 16). Much more empirical insight is necessary. Measured, careful, nuanced scholarship is essential for building a well-informed understanding of current realities.

Social scientists who are focused on family relationships might contribute by researching the question of “How does returning to religion impact individuals, their families, their communities, and larger society?”

In summary, evaluating trends in deconversion and reconversion in the United States leads us to the following conclusions:

1. Most youth and emerging adults who leave religion do not return in the near term, but recent data sets indicate 17–22% rates of return by early adulthood.
2. Several of the factors that promote parent-child religious transmission, including parental religious commitment and a warm parent-child relationship, also play a role in encouraging the eventual return of those who have left religion.
3. Marriage remains a factor for some who return, but parenthood is stronger—particularly when the children of religious “dones” reach school age.
4. Despite some cohort and generational differences (Uecker et al., 2016, p. 385), leading research seems to indicate that today’s young adults resemble earlier generations more than one might imagine if relying on social media instead of social science (Bengtson et al., 2013).



# Conclusion

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In this report we set out to provide a broad overview of the tides of religion in the United States, examining current statistics and trends, potential factors influencing decisions to leave or return to faith, and resultant consequences of those choices on individuals and society.

## Disaffiliation

Disaffiliation is real: people are leaving faith, and more people are being raised without a faith to begin with. But simplistic predictions of religion's demise are premature. Global trends indicate that the world is actually becoming more religious as birth rates in highly religious regions surpass those in increasingly secular areas. Currently, about 8 in 10 individuals worldwide still affiliate with a faith—7 in 10 in the United States—and some evidence suggests that secularization has already begun to level off. Moreover, those who disaffiliate from their faith often retain some religious beliefs and, at least for a time, maintain residual habits and values.

Religious disaffiliation is linked to poorer mental health, lower rates of charitable giving, and declining marriage and birth rates. The decline of religion in the United States may have far-reaching consequences for individual health and longevity, family relationships, community cohesion, and demographic stability.

## Reconversion

There are few rigorous studies with large samples that evaluate individuals who reconvert, and more research in this field would be beneficial, but it is clear that a significant number of leavers return to faith.

Research suggests that 1 in 5 individuals who leave religion in early adulthood eventually reconvert.

Family relationships play a pivotal role in this process; strong, loving relationships with parents can foster reconversion, and having children often strengthens this effect, particularly when children reach school age.

**“...society will continue to be shaped by religion, religion in turn will be influenced by society, and faith will continue to be a powerful force in the world far into the future.”**

Overall, this report paints a complex picture that neither depicts religion as a relic of a bygone age nor downplays the significant headwinds faced by religion in the twenty-first century. What is clear is that society will continue to be shaped by religion, religion in turn will be influenced by society, and faith will continue to be a powerful force in the world far into the future.

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