

## The Future of Christianity in the USA

Last week, I gave [some reflections here](#) on the recent Pew Forum data, most specifically about the rise of the "Nones." I was glad to write more about the issue [for USA Today](#). They put it in on the front of the webpage yesterday and you can see it in your morning paper (page 10a) today.

In a news column, you have to keep your word count to a certain level, but I did write a longer version and thought I would share it here:

You've heard it suggested that the United States is simply Europe on a 50-year delay. Most churches will be museums before your grandchildren reach adulthood.

Though new numbers from Pew Research released this month point to a [decline in American Protestants](#), no serious scholar believes that Christianity in America is on a trajectory of extinction. And, as a Ph.D. researcher and practicing evangelical Christian, I say to those who've read recent reports and come to that conclusion, "Not so fast."

You see, many in the USA who identify as Christian do so only superficially. These "cultural Christians" use the term "Christian" but do not practice the faith.

Now it seems that many of them are even giving up the label, and those cultural (or nominal) Christians are becoming "nones" (people with no religious label).

Christian nominalism is nothing new. As soon as any belief system is broadly held in a culture, people are motivated to adopt it, even with a low level of connection. Yet, much of the change in our religious identification is in nominal Christians no longer using the term and, instead, not identifying with any religion.

In other words, the nominals are becoming the Nones.

I've seen this in my own family, growing up in an Irish Catholic community outside New York City. Yet, really, the Catholic Church was the church we didn't go to. Today, I am an evangelical Christian and I attend church like one, but most of my extended family do not attend church--and don't bother to call themselves Catholics any longer. The nominals became "the nones."

Furthermore, the cultural value of identifying as a Christian is decreasing. When that happens, those whose connection to Christianity was more an identifying mark than a deeply held belief find that they don't need that identity anymore. The label does not matter.

When we consider why someone does (or does not) label themselves as a Christian, we see **three broad ways people identify as Christian**.

"**Cultural Christians**" mark "Christian" on a survey rather than another world religion because they know they are not Hindu, Jewish, etc., or because their family always has. "Churchgoing Christians" identify as such because they occasionally attend worship services.

On the other hand, "**conversion Christians**" claim to have had a faith experience in which they were transformed, resulting in a deeply held belief.

The recent growth in "**nones**," I believe, comes primarily from cultural and churchgoing Christians shifting to the category no longer using a religious identification.

The obvious question is, why the decline at all and what does the future hold? Some may say this sounds exactly like what has happened in Europe.

Well, yes and no.

Europe's religious decline happened for different reasons than what we are seeing here-- bloody religious wars and a church/state alliance leading to mandated religions led to distaste and rejection of religion. That's not the case in the United States and I don't think we will go that path.

Yet, there is movement in religious identification.

This shift should cause us to consider three ramifications:

- First, Christians continue to lose what some have called a home-field advantage. Christianity is no longer the [first choice](#) of many seeking spiritual meaning, and identifying as Christian is not necessary to be an accepted part of society.
- Second, the squishy middle is collapsing. It makes less sense to be a cultural Christian today. Better to be spiritual than religious, unless your religion matters to you, as it does to devout Roman Catholics, Protestants and many others.
- Third, Christianity is not collapsing, but it is being clarified.

If you cut through the recent hype, and look to studies such as the [General Social Survey](#), you'll find that the United States is filled with vibrant believers.

The survey shows that the evangelical movement has remained generally steady from 1972 to 2010 (and, contrary to what you might have heard, the data include young adults), that church attendance has declined among mainline Protestants, and that the "nones" have increased.

But no collapse.

Other examples of resiliency abound.

Each year, Gallup asks Americans whether they consider themselves a born-again or evangelical Christian. Since 1992, the percentage has fluctuated from a [low of 36% in 1992](#) to a high of 47% in 1998.

The 2011 yearly aggregate is 42%, very similar to the percentages over the past eight years.

So, Christianity has hardly been replaced by the "nones."

So, if not extinction, what does the future look like? If trends continue, I believe that the future will look more like the present-day Pacific Northwest. There, we find a majority of the population is **spiritual but not religious**, yet vibrant churches and devout Christians abound.

For example, in the Foursquare Church (a mid-size Pentecostal denomination), the Northwest District oversees 150 churches. Fifteen years ago, 66 of those churches did not exist. Those 66 churches alone report 40,000 new believers. Similar examples of such vibrant growth, there and elsewhere, demonstrate the point.

So, in an increasingly secular environment we have vibrant congregations. That's the future.

It's true that many mainline churches in America, like their European counterparts, have closed down and converted into concert halls and museums. But I find it telling that churches like [Sojourn Community church in Louisville are buying back former cathedrals](#), and filling them anew with vibrant young congregations.

Even in the shadow of the decline of cultural and nominal religion, the future of vibrant Christianity in America is all around us.

**The future of Christianity in America is not extinction but clarification that a devout faith is what will last.**

Christianity in America isn't dying, cultural Christianity is. I am glad to see it go.