

America's Religious Mosaic

by Tom W. Smith

If religious denominations were basically the same, like brands of detergent, then the fact that Americans are divided among more than 1,000 religions would be of little consequence. However, religious groups differ not only in their religious practices, but also in moral views, class structure, family values, and attitudes.

The decennial census is prohibited from inquiring about religion. However, since 1972, the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago have followed Americans' religious attitudes and practices. The surveys find large and persistent differences among religions.

The Protestant religions can be ranked by their traditionalism. At the conservative end are the fundamentalists (Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and so on), Southern Baptists, and other Baptists. Next come the middle moderates—the Lutherans, Methodists, and inter- or non-denominationalists. Finally comes the liberal elite—Unitarians,

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Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians.

Nearly 90 percent of the fundamentalists and Baptists believe in an afterlife. Among the moderate middle and liberal elite, belief slips to about 80 percent. Seventy-five percent of Catholics believe in an afterlife, while only 25 percent of Jews do, compared with 46 percent of people with no religious affiliation.

Fundamentalists and Baptists are often unwilling to allow an atheist the basic civil liberties—to make a speech, teach in a college, or have a book in a public library. Only about 20 percent support all three rights. Support increases among more liberal Protestant denominations, reaching a peak of 54 percent among Episcopalians. About 40 percent of Catholics support all three rights, close to the level found among middle moderates. Support is highest among Jews (61 percent) and people with no religious affiliation (72 percent).

Religious attachment is strongest among the fundamentalists, with 51 percent attending church weekly and 58 percent rating their faith as strong. Among Lutherans and Methodists, weekly attendance falls to 22 to 24 percent, and the proportion with

strong religious faith is in the 33- to 40-percent range. Only 18 percent of Episcopalians attend church weekly, and 31 percent report strong faith.

Catholics are distinguished by their regular church attendance—42 percent go to church every week—but only 41 percent say their faith is strong. Jews on the other hand rarely go to religious services (8 percent each week) but have a comparatively high sense of attachment (42 percent say their faith is strong). It may be that many Jews identify themselves as ethnically Jewish even though they do not actively follow ritual and attend services.

Science and Sex

As the Scopes monkey trial and the recent controversy over creationist science show, attitudes toward modernization in general, and science in particular, are one of the sharpest points of contention among denominations. The General Social Survey asked how much confidence people had in "organized religion" and in "the scientific community." We subtracted the degree of confidence in religion from the degree of confidence in science to get a measure of which was rated more highly by each respondent. We then averaged across

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Chart 1 / Religions in America

Protestants—Moderate & Liberal	34%
Catholic	25%
Protestants—Baptist	21%
Protestants—Fundamentalist	9%
None	7%
Jewish	2%
Other	1%

Source: General Social Surveys,
National Opinion Research Center, 1972-1983

religious groups by subtracting the proportion rating religion more highly from the proportion rating science more highly.

For all groups science came out ahead of religion, but the margin varied dramatically by group. Fundamentalists and Baptists favored science over religion by just 5 to 9 percentage points, Lutherans and Methodists favored science by 13 to 15 percentage points, Presbyterians by 19 percentage points, Episcopalians by 28 percentage points, Catholics by 12 percentage points, Jews by 40 percentage points, and people with no religious affiliation by 58 percentage points.

Fundamentalists and Baptists believe in a strict and traditional sense of sin. They are most likely to condemn homosexual, extramarital, and premarital sex, and to favor outlawing pornography. Sexual permissive-

ness increases among the middle moderates and is highest among the liberal elite. Catholics once again resemble the Protestant center while Jews are even more liberal than the Protestant liberals.

Extramarital relations are judged to be "always wrong" by 86 percent of the fundamentalists, 82 percent of Southern Baptists, 76 percent of Lutherans, 75 percent of Methodists, 70 percent of Presbyterians, 59 percent of Episcopalians, 71 percent of Catholics, and 50 percent of Jews. Only 40 percent of people with no religious affiliation believe extramarital relations are always wrong.

Similar differences in morality appear in attitudes toward drugs and alcohol. Fundamentalists and Baptists are the least likely to smoke, drink, go to bars, or favor the legalization of marijuana. At the other end again are people with no religious affiliation. For example, 88 percent of fundamentalists oppose the legalization of marijuana, as do 80 percent of the middle moderates, 76 percent of Presbyterians, 70 percent of Episcopalians, 75 percent of Catholics, 59 percent of Jews, and 41 percent of people with no religious affiliation.

The major Protestant denominations also differ sharply in their class and social standing. Non-black fundamentalists and Southern Baptists have an average annual household income less than \$15,000. Income averages \$16,300 for Lutherans, \$17,000 for Methodists, \$20,500 for Presbyterians, \$21,700 for Episcopalians, \$17,400 for Catholics, \$23,300 for Jews, and \$17,600 for people with no religious affiliation. Similar differences occur for occu-

pational prestige and for education, where Jews and Episcopalians average three more years of schooling than fundamentalists and Baptists.

Families and Faith

Religions differ substantially on child-rearing values. When asked to rate the desirability of 17 values for children, 45 percent of fundamentalists and Baptists rated obeying parents as one of the top three values. This value was selected by only 28 percent of Lutherans, 30 percent of Methodists, 22 percent of Presbyterians, 17 percent of Episcopalians, 29 percent of Catholics, 19 percent of Jews, and 17 percent of people with no religious affiliation. While some of this difference reflects social class, variation in one's concept of God and sin contributes significantly to child-rearing values.

Fundamentalists lead the opposition to abortions, easy divorce, new roles for women, and birth control information for teenagers. They favor large families. Moderate and liberal religious groups tend to favor freedom of choice, easier divorce laws, nontraditional roles for women, teenage access to birth control information, and smaller families. Catholics are closer to the fundamentalists on these family-oriented issues than on most other issues. Jews are even less traditional than the Protestant liberals.

Support for stricter divorce laws illustrates the general pattern. While 63 percent of the fundamentalists favor stricter laws, this change is backed by 55 percent of Methodists and Lutherans, 47 percent of Presbyterians, 40 percent of Episcopalians, 53 percent of Catholics, 32 percent of Jews,

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and 24 percent of people with no religious affiliation.

Despite these striking differences in attitudes toward the family, there is little variation in the level of satisfaction with family life. Between 43 and 47 percent of the membership of all major groups say they get a "very great deal" of satisfaction from their families. Still, the people with no religious affiliation differ: Only 29 percent report that much satisfaction.

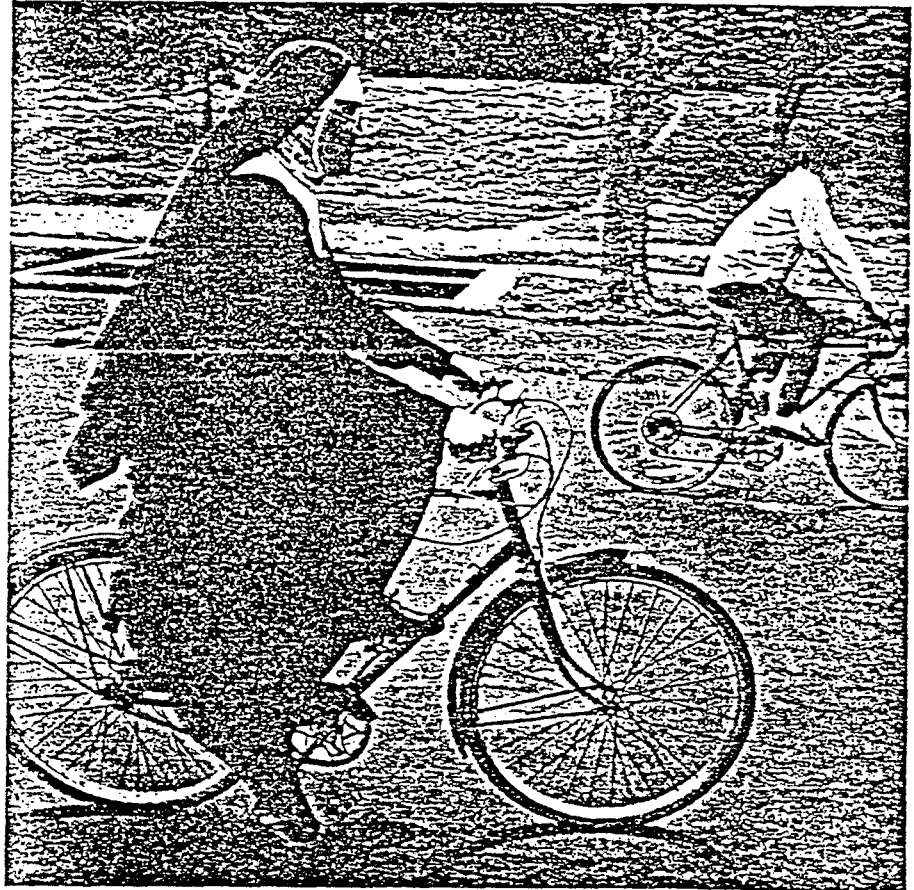
The Quality of Life

Do religious groups vary in the overall quality of their members' lives or psychological well-being? The pattern is mixed. When asked about general happiness, satisfaction with work, and financial satisfaction, the only notable difference among religious groups is the lower well-being reported by those without a religious affiliation. But on a scale that measures social alienation large differences appear.

Fundamentalists and Baptists are more alienated than the moderate middle or the liberal elite. People with no religious affiliation are no more alienated from society than religious groups, but they are less happy and satisfied than others. Fundamentalists are much more alienated from society, but their personal well-being is average.

Fundamentalists probably feel they stand outside an increasingly modern and religiously liberal society, but they are content with their private lives. The religiously detached are more in tune with progressive social changes, but often find less happiness in their personal lives.

Religious groups differ in many



other areas as well, such as political ideology, socializing patterns, and group memberships. A general consensus prevails across religious groups in their nearly uniform support for tougher measures against crime and their commitment to the Protestant work ethic.

Counting the Flocks

Given the wide differences in values and attitudes among religious groups, the relative proportion of the population that belongs to each group helps determine the shape of society. Protestants make up about 64 percent of the adult population, according to data from the General Social

Survey (see Chart 1). Among five major Protestant families, the largest are the Baptists—the mostly white Southern Baptist Convention, the Northern American Baptist Church, and several black churches such as the two National Baptist Conventions—who account for 21 percent of the adult population.

Second are the Methodists with 12 percent. The United Methodist Church is by far the largest, while two African Methodist Episcopal churches include most black Methodists. Next come the Lutherans with 8 percent. Two of the larger churches, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church of America,

Table 1 / Religious Composition by Birth Cohort

	Year of Birth				
	Prior to 1907	1907-1923	1924-1940	1941-1957	1958-1965
Fundamentalists	11.8%	7.8%	9.2%	9.7%	12.0%
Southern Baptists	12.3	13.7	13.9	12.4	14.4
Misc. Protestants	1.1	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.5
Other Baptists	6.7	6.7	7.5	7.8	7.2
Lutherans	9.5	9.4	8.3	7.1	5.7
Methodists	15.9	16.1	11.6	9.1	7.7
Inter/non-denominational	3.2	3.1	3.3	3.4	2.8
Liberals	3.4	3.3	2.5	1.5	0.8
Presbyterians	6.6	5.6	4.8	3.5	3.0
Episcopalians	3.3	2.9	3.0	2.2	1.8
Catholics	19.4	23.2	26.4	27.5	28.7
Jews	3.1	3.1	2.1	2.1	0.8
None	3.0	3.4	5.2	10.8	13.0
Other	0.6	0.8	1.2	2.0	1.5

together with the Evangelical Lutheran Churches, are in the process of merging.

Roman Catholics, representing about one-quarter of the adult population, are the largest single religious denomination. Jews are 2 to 3 percent, followed by a host of religions such as Eastern Orthodox, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Sufi, and others, adding up to a little over 1 percent.

About 7 percent of American adults say they have no religious affiliation. Most of these are atheists, agnostics, or people who simply do not care about religion. But about 10 percent of the unaffiliated attend church several times a year.

Religious Trends

Over the long haul, the distribution of Americans by religion has changed tremendously. The proportion of

Catholics rose from tiny levels in 1776 to one-quarter of the population at present because of immigration from Europe and Latin America. Some religions have grown at the expense of others. Baptists began expanding in the South in the mid-18th century and eventually supplanted the Anglicans as the dominant religion in the region.

Finally, new religions have been founded, and several such as the Latter Day Saints and Christian Scientists have become major churches. However, religious distribution tends to remain stable from one decade to the next, because religion tends to be inherited.

Although the religious balance of the population has not shifted dramatically over the past decade, such demographic factors as the declining birthrate, migration, and cohort turnover bring changes. Since most adults

retain their religious affiliation throughout life, the religious composition of younger age groups versus older groups can give an indication of future changes (Table 1).

Most groups among the moderate middle and liberals (Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and others) have lost ground among recent birth cohorts. A cohort refers to people born in a given year or time period. Presbyterians made up 6.6 percent of those born before 1907 but only 3.0 percent of those born between 1958 and 1965. But Catholics and people without a religious affiliation have made steady gains.

The enormous increase in the numbers of people who have no religious preference can be misleading. Since many people disassociate from churches as young adults only to reaffirm their faith when they form a family and enter middle age, the statistics partly reflect a transitory life-cycle effect rather than an enduring cohort effect. Still, the increase in the numbers of nonreligious occurs even in cohorts that have already entered the life stage where religious recovery occurs. So a real shift away from religious affiliation is taking place among Americans.

Also, fundamentalists have been showing appreciable gains among recent cohorts. Although their share dropped sharply from the oldest cohort to those born around World War I, it has risen steadily since, reaching a record high among the most recent cohort.

As the older cohorts die and the more recent cohorts make up a larger share of the adult population, the proportions at either end of the re-

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religious spectrum (fundamentalists on the one hand and the nonreligious on the other) should both increase, intensifying the split among Americans in values and attitudes.

Catholics may gain ground because their Hispanic members have high fertility rates. Immigration, both legal and illegal, will also boost Catholics relative to all other groups. Jews, on the other hand, may lose ground because of their low fertility.

The Conversion Factor

Religious conversions could upset the demographic factors that determine the size of religious groups. While future patterns of conversion are uncertain, the conversion experience of the current population suggests a coming upswing in fundamentalism.

Table 2 shows the shift in affiliation from the religions the respondents were raised in to their current churches. There is an inverse relationship between stability (the percentage whose religion did not change) and net conversion (the ratio of converts to disaffiliates). No religion with high stability gained more converts than it lost, and all net gainers were religious groups with low stability.

Few people report being raised without religious affiliation, and for every person raised without religion who adopts a church, over three people forsake their religion for no religion. Inter- or non-denominational churches also are gaining.

If we consider the demographic factors along with the conversion pattern, fundamentalists stand out. Fundamentalism is gaining among

Table 2 / Religious Conversions

	Percent of Current Members Raised in Same Faith	Ratio of Converts/Disaffiliates*
Fundamentalists.....	52.0%	1.53
Southern Baptists.....	86.0	0.53
Misc. Protestants.....	40.5	1.15
Other Baptists.....	77.3	0.65
Lutherans.....	75.7	0.81
Methodists.....	72.4	0.57
Inter/non-denominational.....	27.8	2.74
Liberals.....	49.5	1.03
Presbyterians.....	59.8	0.81
Episcopalians.....	54.0	1.29
Catholics.....	89.7	0.57
Jews.....	93.3	0.40
None.....	16.1	3.32
Other.....	46.9	2.07
All.....	69.7	

*A ratio greater than one means the religion gains more through conversion than it loses through disaffiliation.

the young and it is winning converts. Only immigration works against its future growth.

People with no religious affiliation will probably also become more numerous. Since the inheritance rate of non-affiliation is so low, it is most vulnerable to losses in religious revival.

Finally, Catholics should gain. Cohort succession, Hispanic fertility, and immigration all work in their favor. They lose more than they gain through conversion, but since they have one of the highest levels of religious inheritance the loss is small.

Methodists are likely to continue to lose ground since their conversion level is low and their cohort share declining. Presbyterians seem to be losing ground for the same reasons as the Methodists, although not as rapidly. Jews are also likely to decline in number. While they have the highest

inheritance rate, they lose more members than they gain, and their low fertility and aging population point to at least relative decline.

America is crisscrossed by many subcultures—racial, ethnic, and regional divisions, as well as by the religious groups examined here. With the recent large mergers among Lutherans and Presbyterians, the continuing push for ecumenicalism by the National Council of Churches and others, and the forces that are said to be forging a homogeneous post-industrial society, we might wonder whether religious pluralism will fade.

In the long run who knows? But over the next several decades the magnitude of religious differences, the persistence of established faiths, and the continual development of new faiths ensures religious diversity.