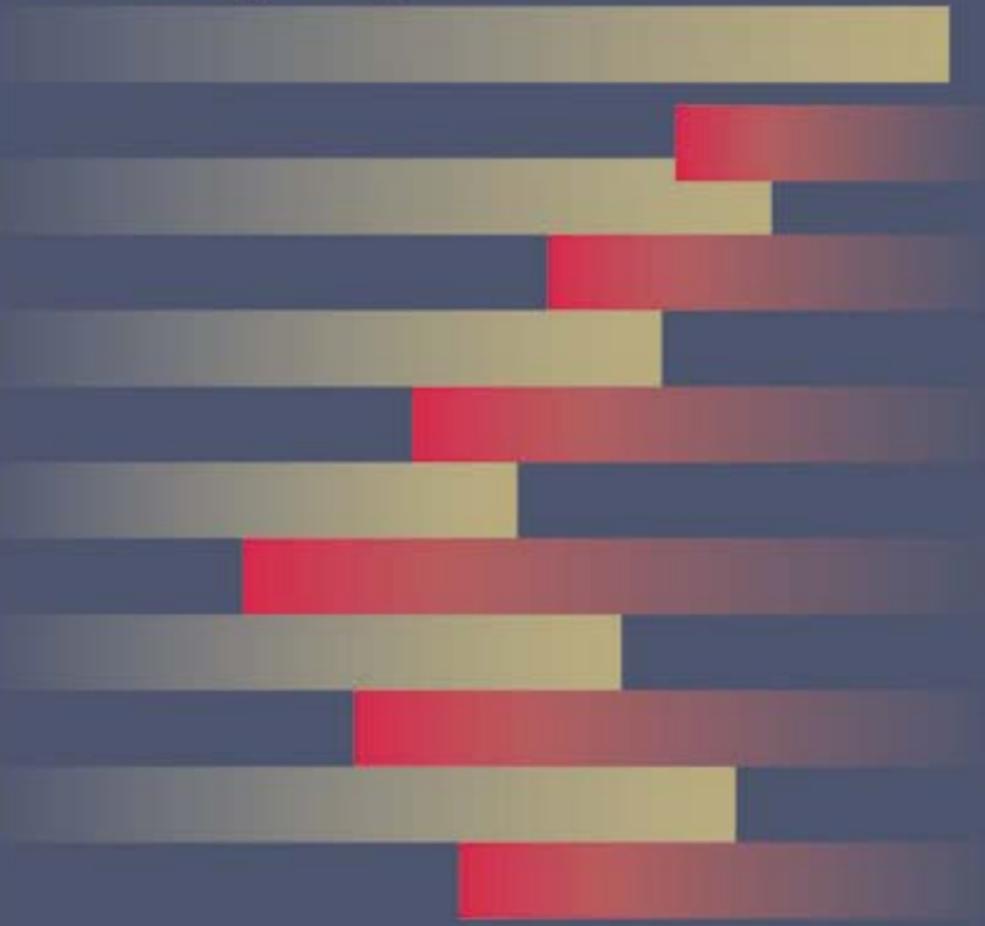


# AMERICAN RELIGION

Contemporary Trends



MARK CHAVES

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*Contemporary Trends*

MARK CHAVES

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*For Matthew and Christopher*



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## Acknowledgments

**T**his book began with a phone call from Peter Marsden asking me to write a religion chapter for a volume he was editing on social trends in the United States. That invitation led me to examine religious trends more systematically than I had before, and I learned that more had changed than was widely known or appreciated, and more had changed than could be described in a single chapter. A book seemed in order.

I have not produced this book alone. Shawna Anderson, co-author of the chapter in Peter Marsden's volume, analyzed data, created tables and graphs, and helped me figure out what was changing and what was staying the same in American religion. Gary Thompson analyzed more data,

created more tables and graphs, and cheerfully replicated almost every number cited in these pages. Cyrus Schleifer made sure that figure 7.1 took account of the General Social Survey's 1984 coding change—a job that was more difficult than it sounds.

This book would not have been possible without two major data sources: the General Social Survey (GSS) and the National Congregations Study (NCS). Both of these data sources are publicly available, so it is easy to take them for granted. But it is appropriate for GSS users like me to acknowledge that this extraordinary resource exists in such accessible form only because of the National Science Foundation's ongoing support, the foresight of the GSS's founder, James Davis, and the stewardship of its current Principal Investigators, Peter Marsden, Michael Hout, and, especially, Tom Smith. And as Principal Investigator for the National Congregations Study, I am acutely aware that this resource for studying religious change exists only because of generous support from the Lilly Endowment and additional grants (for the NCS's second wave) from the National Science Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, and the Louisville Institute.

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# AMERICAN RELIGION



## 1 | Introduction

**B**y world standards, the United States is a highly religious country. Almost all Americans say they believe in God, a majority say they pray, and more than a third say they attend religious services every week. Some skepticism is appropriate here. It is not always clear what people mean when they say they believe in God or pray, and many people believe in a God that is quite untraditional. Moreover, people do not really go to church as often as they tell pollsters that they go. But even when we take all this into account, Americans still are more pious than people in any Western country, with the possible exception of Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

We cannot say anything definitive about very long-term trends in U.S. religious beliefs and practices because high-

quality national surveys do not exist before the middle of the twentieth century. Still, historical studies of local communities suggest that today's relatively high levels of religiosity have characterized American society from its beginnings. Brooks Holifield, a prominent historian of American religion, put it this way: "For most of the past three hundred years, from 35 to 40 percent of the population has probably participated in congregations with some degree of regularity."<sup>2</sup> The weekly religious service attendance rate implied by the best national survey in 2008 is within that range: 37 percent. This overstates true weekly attendance because people say that they attend services more often than they really do, but it probably represents fairly the proportion of Americans who participate in congregations more or less regularly. The continuity is striking.

Considering the continuing high levels of American religiosity, it is tempting to treat any signs of change as mere footnotes to the main story of continuity. But American religion has changed in recent decades, and it is important to clarify what is changing and what is staying the same. As we will see, recent religious trends mainly are slow-moving—even glacial. But slow-moving does not mean unimportant, and long-term, slow social change still can be profound social change. We should not overstate change, but we also should not allow the considerable continuity in American

religion to blind us to the real change that has occurred and is occurring. I will try to strike the right balance between the twin dangers of overstating and understating recent changes in American religion.

Some of the trends I highlight in this book are well known. Others are not. This book documents even the well-known trends in order to provide a stand-alone summary of important religious change in the United States.<sup>3</sup> I seek to summarize the key big-picture changes in American religion since 1972. I will describe rather than explain, and I will focus on aggregate national change rather than differences among subgroups. I do not try to document all the interesting differences between, say, men and women, blacks and whites, Christians and Jews, northerners and southerners, liberals and conservatives, or other subgroups of U.S. residents. I offer no overarching theory or major reinterpretation. I occasionally will comment on variations across subgroups of Americans, but only when knowing about such differences is important to understanding the aggregate picture. I occasionally will mention explanations of the trends, but only when a straightforward and well-established explanation exists. This book is for those who do not know, but who want to know, in broad brush, what is changing and what is not in American religion. Those who want to dig deeper can follow the notes to additional reading. My