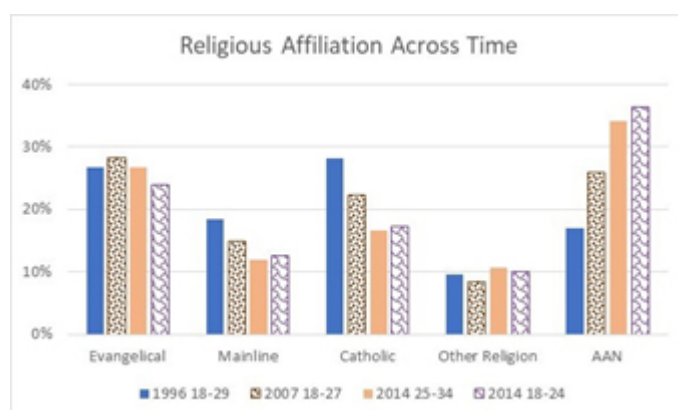


# Religious Affiliation of American Emerging Adults: 1996 to 2014

In my past few posts, I have been focusing on data from the monumental surveys taken by Pew Research in 2007<sup>{1}</sup> and 2014<sup>{2}</sup>. These surveys of about 35,000 Americans allow us to get more accurate data on American beliefs and drill down with greater confidence into specific subsets of Americans (e.g. emerging adults, Asian-Americans, those with advanced degrees). The earlier posts focused on the Nones and their increased role in American society. In this post, we will consider the general religious makeup of American emerging adults. In subsequent posts, we will look at their religious beliefs, religious practice and their cultural beliefs.

The Pew surveys parse religious affiliation down to specific denominations. In this post, I have combined those into five categories: Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Other Religions, and Atheists/Agnostics/Nothing in Particular (the Nones). The Pew surveys list Historically Black Churches as a separate group. I used the technique described in the footnote below<sup>{3}</sup> to assign the different historically black denominations to Evangelical or Mainline Protestant.



In the figure to the right, I have shown how the denominational categories split up the population in 1996, 2007 and 2014. Data from the 1996 survey by Pew on Religion and Politics<sup>[4]</sup> was added to provide a better understanding of the trends in religious affiliation among young adults.

As shown, both Mainline and Catholic denominations have decreased significantly over this period. Mainline denominations have decreased from 18.5% down to 12.0%, or by almost a third. During the same time period, Catholics have reduced from 28% to about 17%, a reduction of almost 40%. By 2014, almost half (46%) of young adult Catholics were Hispanic. At the same time, only about 37% of emerging adult Hispanics (18–29) reported being affiliated with a Catholic church as compared to over 55% of those Hispanics over 40. Seven years earlier, in 2007, well over half (55%) of emerging adult Hispanics reported being affiliated with the Catholic Church, highlighting a dramatic drop by 2014. So, we find this interesting mix of trends:

- the percentage of Catholics is greatly reduced,
- young Hispanics are significantly less likely to be Catholics than in the past,
- but still almost half of young Catholics are Hispanic.

In contrast, the Atheists, Agnostics and Nothing in Particulars (Nones) have more than doubled, going from 17% of the young adult population up to about 36% in 2014, as discussed in an earlier post.

Over the same period, those selecting to affiliate with an Evangelical denomination and those affiliating with another religion (e.g. Mormon, Muslim, Hindu) have remained relatively constant.

The data from these surveys shows that the results reported in my book, *Cultural Captives*, from 2010 are continuing at an alarming pace. Those results indicate that the Nones will soon

constitute the majority of emerging adults in America largely at the expense of Mainline Protestants and Catholics. Although declining at a slower pace than other Christian denominations, Evangelicals are showing a steady decline as well.

## Notes

1. The **U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

2. The **U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

3. **Historically Black denominations affiliated with Evangelicals**: All Baptists except for Progressive Baptists, Nondenominational blacks, Pentecostals, and Holiness Family

**Historically Black denominations affiliated with Mainline Protestants**: Progressive Baptists, Methodists, non-specific Protestants

4. **Religion and Politics Survey 1996**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

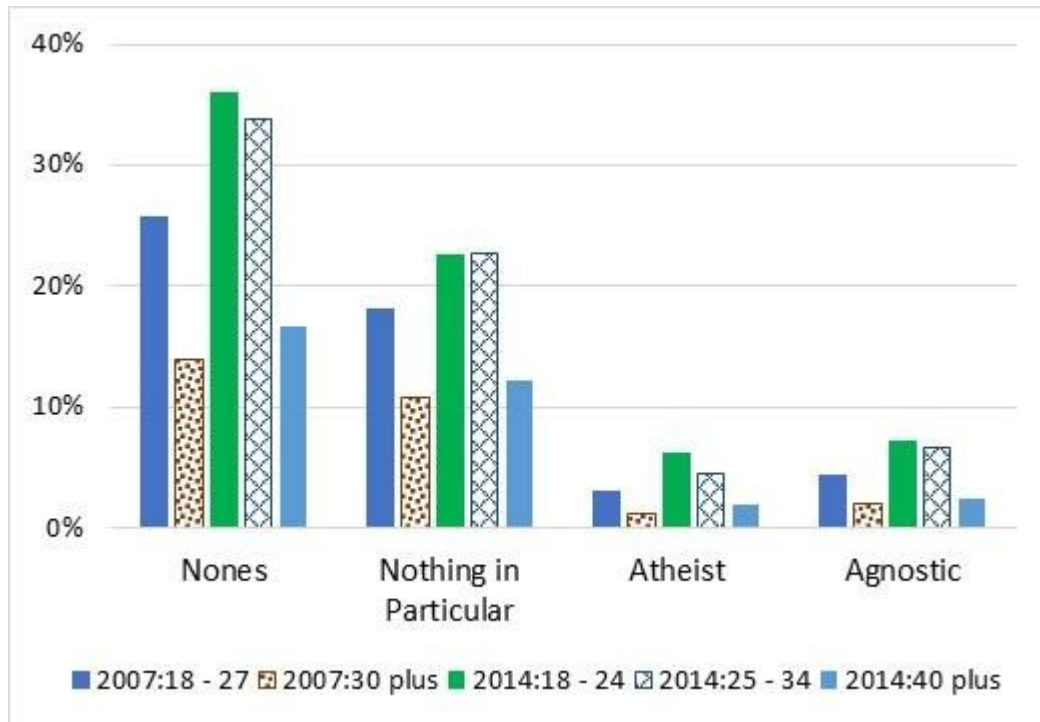
# Update on Nones: Continuing to Dominate the Developing American Religious Scene

*Steve Cable provides an update on those with no affiliation with religious traditions. It appears that soon, the majority of American emerging adults will identify as something other than a Christian.*

Pew Research has done a great service to those who want to understand the current trends of religious beliefs in America. In 2007, they interviewed about 35,000 Americans to create the 2007 American Religious Landscape Study [{1}](#). Then in 2014, they interviewed a similar size group of Americans using many of the same questions (along with a few new or different questions) to create the 2014 American Religious Landscape Study [{2}](#). Most surveys of this nature include 1,000 to 3,000 respondents which limits their accuracy when considering subsets of the data by age, religious preference, education, ethnicity, etc. By collecting responses from such a large number of people, we can look at these subsets with a much greater level of confidence.

I want to begin by updating our understanding of the dominant religious trend in America this century: the so-called rise of the Nones [{3}](#). The Nones are those people who choose not to affiliate with any religious tradition. In the Pew survey, Nones include atheists, agnostics, and “nothing in particular” respondents. We can understand how this phenomenon is growing by examining the results shown in Figure 1. People were asked

“What is your present religion, if any?”



In Figure 1, the first group of bars reflects the percentage of Nones at different times (i.e. 2007 and 2014) and for different age segments. The first two bars show the percentage of Nones in 2007 for those between 18 and 27, and for those 30 years and older. As shown, over 25% of Americans under the age of 28 selected a None category. For those 30 and older, only 14% selected a None category. This was a tremendous growth over the levels up to the early 1990's when the GSS survey<sup>[4]</sup> reported 11% of those under 30 and 7% of those 30 and over.

But this amazing growth in Nones is far from over, as shown in the last three bars in the first group summarizing the response in 2014. As shown, the youngest group (ages 18 – 24) showed 36% selecting a None category. The group from 25 to 34 selected None at almost the same rate, 34%. This age group would have been 18 to 27 in 2007 when about 25% of them selected None. Over this seven-year period almost 10% of that age group switched from some other religion to None.

Some people suggest that these young adults will return to church as they begin raising children. What does the data say?

Looking at a slightly older group, I compared those 23 to 32 in 2007 with those 30 to 39 in 2014. What I found follows the same trend: 23% of those in 2007 were Nones while 27% of those in 2014 were Nones. Even those over forty increased to 17% from 14%, a significant growth over the level only seven years earlier for those age 30 plus at the time. Thus, we see no trend of emerging adult Nones turning into church attending, Christians as they age in fact just the opposite. More of them are becoming Nones as they move towards middle age

The next three sets of bars break the Nones up into the three constituencies: Nothing in Particular, Atheist and Agnostic. About two thirds of Nones identify as Nothing in Particular with the remainder about evenly split between Atheist and Agnostic.

In my next post, we will see what these Nones believe about basic Christian doctrine and if they have a somewhat active spiritual life. And in later post, we will also look to see what religions these Nones identified with as children.

For now, our bottom line takeaway is that more than 46% of emerging adults (ages 18 through 29) identify with either another religion (10%) or None (36%), meaning that in a few short years **the majority of American emerging adults will identify as something other than a Christian**. If this trend concerns you, please take a look at our church-wide and small group study called Periscope. Periscope is targeted to address issues taking today's believer captive and blunting their witness to the world around them. For more information, go to [www.upPeriscope.com](http://www.upPeriscope.com).

1. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the Pew

Research Center.

2. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

3. Stephen Cable, *The Rise of the Nones*, November 6, 2016, [probe.org/the-rise-of-the-nones-reaching-the-lost-in-todays-america/](http://probe.org/the-rise-of-the-nones-reaching-the-lost-in-todays-america/)

4. General Social Survey 1990, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by the James Davis, Tom Smith and Peter Marsden.

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# Trends in American Religious Beliefs: An Update

*Steve Cable examines the newest data reflecting Americans' religious beliefs. It's not encouraging.*

## Are Nones Still Increasing Toward a Majority?

One dismaying trend in my book, *Cultural Captives*, was the significant growth of people indicating their religion was

atheist, agnostic, or nothing at all, referred to collectively as **the nones**. In 2008, the percentage of emerging adults (18- to 29-year-olds) who self-identified as **nones** was one fourth of the population, a tremendous increase almost two and a half times higher than recorded in 1990.

Now, let's look at some updated data on emerging adults. In 2014, the General Social Survey<sup>{1}</sup> showed the percentage of **nones** was now up to **one third** of the population. The Pew Religious Landscape<sup>{2}</sup> survey of over 35,000 Americans tallied **35% identifying as nones**.

When we consider everyone who does not identify as either Protestant or Catholic (i.e., adding in other religions such as Islam and Hinduism), the **percentage of emerging adults who do not identify as Christians increases to 43% of the population** in both surveys.

If this growth continues at the rate it has been on since 1990, we will see **over half** of American emerging adults who do not self-identify as Christians by 2020. Becoming, at least numerically, a post-Christian culture.

Some distinguished scholars have suggested that a large percentage of "**nones**" are actually Christians who just have an aversion to identifying with a particular religious tradition. Using the GSS from 2014, we can probe this assertion using three investigative avenues:

How many of the "**nones**" in this survey say they actually attend a church at least once a month? The answer: less than 7% of them.

How many of these "**nones**" say they believe in a God, believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and believe that there is life after death? The answer: about 12% of them.

3. How many of these "**nones**" attend a church *and* have the



three beliefs listed above? The answer: about one out of every one hundred emerging adults not identifying as a practicing Christian.

What about the “nothing at all” respondents, who are not atheists or agnostics? Perhaps, they simply do not want to identify with a specific Christian tradition. Since the majority of **nones** fall into this “nothing at all” category, if all the positive answers to the three questions above were given by “nothing at alls,” their percentages would still be very small.

Clearly, the vast majority of **nones** and “nothing at alls” have broken away from organized religion and basic Christian doctrine. Most are not, as some scholars suggest, young believers keeping their identity options open.

American has long been non-evangelical in thinking, but is now becoming post-Christian as well.

## **Role of Pluralism and Born-Agains in Our Emerging Adult Population**

Pluralists believe there are many ways to eternal life, e.g. Christianity and Islam. Our 2010 book, *Cultural Captives*, looked at pluralism among American emerging adults (18 – 29), finding nearly 90% of non-evangelicals and 70% of evangelicals were pluralists. So, the vast majority of young Americans believed in multiple ways to heaven.

Is that position changing in this decade? We analyzed two newer survey, Portraits of American Life Survey 2012<sup>{3}</sup> and Faith Matters 2011<sup>{4}</sup>. In the first, if a person disagreed strongly with the following, we categorized them as not pluralistic:

1. It doesn't much matter what I believe so long as I am a good person.

2. The founder of Islam, Muhammad, was the holy prophet of God.

In the second, if a person agreed strongly that “one religion is true and others are not,” they are not pluralistic.

For non-evangelical, emerging adults, the number of pluralists grew to 92%. For evangelicals, the number grew to 76%. For those over thirty the number of evangelical pluralists drops to two out of three; still a disturbing majority of those called to evangelize their fellow citizens.

Under the threat of death, Peter told the Jewish leaders, “This Jesus . . . has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”[\[5\]](#)

God sent His Son because there was no other way to provide redemption. Many evangelicals seem to think this great sacrifice is one of many ways to reconciliation. But Jesus said, “**No one** comes to the Father except through me.”[\[6\]](#)

Not only are Protestants more pluralistic, at the same time there are fewer Protestants. From 1976 to 2008, emerging adults identifying as born-again Protestants only dropped from 28% to 25% of the population. Today only 20% are born-again Protestants while 43% are non-Christian.

Protestants who do not consider themselves to be born-again have dropped further, from around one quarter in 1990 down to around 14% now.

We are heading to a day when over half of emerging adults will be non-Christians and less than one fourth will identify as Protestants. And, the majority of those Protestants will take a pluralistic view, ignoring the call to evangelize—a major change in the religious make up of our country.

# Biblical Worldview Beliefs Considered from A Newer Survey

In our book, *Cultural Captives*, we reported that about one in three evangelical emerging adults and about one in ten non-evangelical emerging adults held a biblical worldview.

Today, we consider a newer survey of over 2,600 people called Faith Matters 2011.[\[7\]](#)

The questions used to define a biblical worldview were on: 1) belief in God, 2) belief in life after death, 3) the path to salvation, 4) inspiration of the Bible, 5) the existence of hell, and 6) how to determine right and wrong.

Let's begin by looking at how many have a biblical worldview on all of the questions above except for the correct path to salvation. About half of evangelical emerging adults (those 18 – 29) take a biblical view versus about 15% of non-evangelicals.

Adding the question about the path to salvation moves evangelical emerging adults from 50% down to about 5%. The question causing this massive reduction is: "Some people believe that the path to salvation comes through our actions or deeds and others believe that the path to salvation lies in our beliefs or faith. Which comes closer to your views?" The vast majority of evangelicals responding were unwilling to say that salvation is by faith alone even though the Bible clearly states this is the case. Many of them responded with both, even though it was not one of the options given.

However, the reason may not be that evangelicals feel that they need to do some good works to become acceptable for heaven. Instead, they want to leave room for a pluralistic view that surmises that others, not really knowing of Jesus' sacrifice, may get by on their righteous activities. Supporting this premise, the Faith Matters survey shows that about 80% of evangelicals believe that there are more ways to

heaven other than faith in Jesus Christ.

Another survey the 2012 Portraits in American Life Survey (PALS){8} also included questions similar to the biblical worldview questions above but did not ask how one obtained eternal life. About one in three evangelical{9} believers under the age of 30 professed a biblical worldview on those questions.

These new surveys clearly demonstrate a biblical worldview is not rebounding among emerging adults

## **How Confident are Americans in Those Running Organized Religion?**

What do the people of America feel about organized religion? Have those feelings changed since 1976? We can explore these questions using data from the General Social Survey (GSS) which asked this question across the decades from 1976 up to 2014:

As far as the people running organized religion are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

Not surprisingly, the surveys show our confidence in these religious leaders has degraded over time. Let's begin by looking at how these results play out for different age groups.

Across all age groups, the number with "a great deal of confidence" in the leaders of organized religion dropped significantly from 1976 to 2014. The greatest drop from 30% down to 15% was among emerging adults at the time of the survey.

At the same time, those having "hardly any confidence" grew significantly. Both emerging adults and those 45 and over increased the number taking this negative position by about

35% since 1976. For emerging adults, this was an increase from 20% in 1976 to 27% in 2014.

Now let's look at how these results play out across different faith communities, specifically Protestants who claim to be born again, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Other Religions and Nones (i.e. atheists, agnostics and nothing at all).

Once again consider those who said they had "a great deal of confidence" in the leaders of organized religion. All Christian groups show a significant downward trend in their confidence in faith leaders. Not surprisingly, the Nones fell by well over 60%, probably reflecting the general negative trend. If the mainstream population has problems with their religious leaders, the AAN's are more than happy to jump on the bandwagon, expressing disdain toward those leaders. Mainline Protestants experienced the largest drop among any Christian religious group, dropping almost half from 32% down to 18% across the period.

Do we see a similar uptick across all religions in the percentage of respondents having "hardly any confidence" in the leaders of organized religion? Actually, we do not. We had significant decreases among born-again Protestants and those of other non-Christian religions. At the same time, we saw increases among Mainline Protestants and Catholics and a very significant increase among the AAN's.

The trends shown here leads one to ask, Can religion have a positive impact on our society when four out of five people do not express a great deal of confidence in its leaders? Make it a point to contribute to our society by promoting a positive view of the religious leaders in your church and denomination.

## **The Hispanic Religious Landscape**

Since 1980, our Hispanic population has grown from 6.5% to 17.4%, almost tripling their percentage of our total

population.

Many assume the Hispanic population would be primarily Catholic from the 1980's to today. Looking at General Social Surveys from 1976 through 2014, we can see what the actual situation is. Not surprisingly, in 1976 approximately 80% of Hispanics in American self-identified as Catholics. But, the 1980's saw a downward trend in this number, so that through the 1990's up until 2006, approximately 68% of Hispanics identified as Catholics. From 2006 to 2014, this percentage has dropped significantly down to about 55%.

At the same time, the percentage of Hispanics identifying as "nones," i.e., one having no religious affiliation, has grown from about 6% in the 1990's to 16% in 2014 (and to a high of 22% for emerging adult, Hispanics) according to GSS data.

The median age of Hispanics in America is much lower than that of other ethnicities. Many Hispanics in American are emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 29. How do their beliefs stack up? The GSS data shows that about 45% of Hispanic emerging adults indicate a Catholic affiliation while the Pew survey shows only 35%. Both surveys show that significantly less than half of emerging adult Hispanics are Catholic. So have they become mainline, evangelical, "nones" or some Eastern religion?

Both surveys show a significant increase in the percentage of Hispanic "nones" for emerging adults compared to those over 30. As with other ethnic groups, Hispanic emerging adults are much more likely to select a religious affiliation of "none" than are older adults. According to extensive data in the Pew Research survey, among emerging adults, the 31% of Hispanics who identify as "nones" is coming very close to surpassing the 35% who identify as Catholic.

A majority of Hispanics still identify as Catholics. How closely are they associated with their local Catholic church

through regular attendance? Among emerging adult Hispanics affiliated with a Catholic church, about two out of three state that they attend church once a month or less. So, the vast majority are not frequent attenders, but are still more likely to attend than their white counterparts. Among emerging adult whites affiliated with a Catholic church, about four out of five state that they attend church once a month or less.

Soon more Hispanics will be “nones,” evangelicals and mainline Protestants than are Catholic, portending dramatic shifts in the worldview of American Hispanics.

The religious makeup of young Americans is changing dramatically in the early part of this century. We need to proclaim the good news of Christ to our emerging generation.

## Notes

1. General Social Survey 2014, National Opinion Research Center, 2014, The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected by Tom W. Smith.
2. Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, page 11, source: 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study.
3. Emerson, Michael O., and David Sikkink. *Portraits of American Life Study*, 2nd Wave 2012.
4. Data downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected on behalf of Harvard University and the University of Notre Dame, principal investigators: Robert Putnam, Thomas Sander, and David E. Campbell.
5. Acts 4:11-12.
6. John 14:6.
7. Data downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com), and were collected on behalf of Harvard University and the University of Notre Dame, principal investigators: Robert Putnam, Thomas Sander, and David E.

Campbell.

8. Emerson, Michael O., and David Sikkink. Portraits of American Life Study, 2nd Wave, 2012.

9. Evangelical includes those who associate with a Historically Black Protestant Church as well as those who associate with an evangelical church.

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# **Biblical Worldview Beliefs as Seen in the Faith Matters Survey of 2011**

*Steve Cable analyzes survey data about the worldviews of young adults. The results were not encouraging.*

More Cultural Research from Steve Cable

In my book,