

faith SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

CHARLES SIGLER, D.PHIL.

Religion in America

An extensive survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life details statistics on religion in America and explores the shifts taking place in the U.S. religious landscape. Based on interviews with more than 35,000 Americans age 18 and older, the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey found that religious affiliation in the U.S. is both very diverse and extremely fluid.

What follows are excerpts and selected findings from the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, which draws primarily on a nationwide survey conducted from May 8 to Aug. 13, 2007. For extensive information on religious affiliation, religious beliefs and practices, and other characteristics of major American religious traditions, go to the Pew Forum website for the [Religious Landscape Survey](#). You can even obtain information on demographics, beliefs and practices or social and political views by major religious traditions. There is a neat "Portraits" feature that quickly sorts this information by religious tradition; it also allows you to compare religious traditions. Very handy site if you are interested in information on religion in America.

Key Findings and Statistics on Religion in America

More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion - or no religion at all. If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.

The survey finds that the number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today (16.1%) is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion.

The Landscape Survey confirms that the United States is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country; the number of Americans who report that they are members of Protestant denominations now stands at barely 51%. Moreover, the Protestant population is characterized by significant internal diversity and fragmentation, encompassing hundreds of different denominations loosely grouped around three fairly

distinct religious traditions - evangelical¹ Protestant churches (26.3% of the overall adult population), mainline Protestant churches (18.1%) and historically black Protestant churches (6.9%).

The survey finds that constant movement characterizes the American religious marketplace, as every major religious group is simultaneously gaining and losing adherents. Those that are growing as a result of religious change are simply gaining new members at a faster rate than they are losing members. Conversely, those that are declining in number because of religious change simply are not attracting enough new members to offset the number of adherents who are leaving those particular faiths.

Selected Survey Highlights

- Men are significantly more likely than women to claim no religious affiliation. Nearly one-in-five men say they have no formal religious affiliation, compared with roughly 13% of women.
- Among people who are married, nearly four-in-ten (37%) are married to a spouse with a different religious affiliation. (This figure includes Protestants who are married to another Protestant from a different denominational family, such as a Baptist who is married to a Methodist.) Hindus and Mormons are the most likely to be married (78% and 71%, respectively) and to be married to someone of the same religion (90% and 83%, respectively).
- Mormons and Muslims are the groups with the largest families; more than one-in-five Mormon adults and 15% of Muslim adults in the U.S. have three or more children living at home.
- The Midwest most closely resembles the religious makeup of the overall population. The South, by a wide margin, has the heaviest concentration of members of evangelical Protestant churches. The Northeast has the greatest concentration of Catholics, and the West has the largest proportion of unaffiliated people, including the largest proportion of atheists and agnostics.
- People not affiliated with any particular religion stand out for their relative youth compared with other religious traditions. Among the unaffiliated, 31% are under age 30 and 71% are under age 50. Comparable numbers for the overall adult population are 20% and 59%, respectively.
- By contrast, members of mainline Protestant churches and Jews are older, on average, than members of other groups. Roughly half of Jews and members of mainline churches are age 50 and older, compared with approximately four-in-ten American adults overall.

¹ The sense of “evangelical” used by the Pew Forum is via self report as to whether they were “born-again or evangelical Christian” and membership in specific denominations. This is different than the approach used by George Barna, which emphasizes doctrine; and it yields a much higher percentage—26% of the U.S. population versus George Barna’s 7%. See Appendix 3 of the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey “Classification of Protestant Denominations” and the Pew Forum link to the Religion News article entitled: “What’s the meaning of Evangelical?” by Steve Waldman. For information on Barna’s understanding of evangelical, try <http://barna.org>.

- Jehovah's Witnesses have the lowest retention rate of any religious tradition. Only 37% of all those who say they were raised as Jehovah's Witnesses still identify themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses.
- Members of Baptist churches account for one-third of all Protestants and close to one-fifth of the total U.S. adult population. Baptists also account for nearly two-thirds of members of historically black Protestant churches.

Religious Demographics of the United States

Overall, nearly eight-in-ten (78.4%) adults report belonging to various forms of Christianity, about 5% belong to other faiths and almost one-in-six (16.1%) are not affiliated with any particular religion.

Members of Protestant churches now constitute only a slim majority (51.3%) of the overall adult population. But Protestantism in the U.S. is not homogeneous; rather, it is divided into three distinct traditions – evangelical Protestant churches (26.3% of the overall adult population and roughly one-half of all Protestants); mainline Protestant churches (18.1% of the adult population and more than one-third of all Protestants); and historically black Protestant churches (6.9% of the overall adult population and slightly less than one-seventh of all Protestants). Protestantism is also comprised of numerous denominational families (e.g., Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal) that fit into one or more of the traditions.

Catholics account for nearly one-quarter (23.9%) of the adult population and roughly three-in-ten American Christians. Other Christian traditions are much smaller. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and other Mormon groups account for 1.7% of the adult population, while Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Orthodox churches each account for slightly less than 1% (0.7% and 0.6%, respectively). A variety of other Christian churches account for an additional 0.3% of the adult population.

Other major faith traditions in the U.S. include Jews (1.7% of the adult population), Buddhists (0.7%), Muslims (0.6%), Hindus (0.4%) and members of other world religions, including Baha'is, Zoroastrians and others (which together account for less than 0.3% of the population). Members of a variety of other faiths, including Unitarians, New Age groups and Native American religions, combine to make up an additional 1.2% of the population. Finally, individuals who are not affiliated with any particular religion make up about one-sixth (16.1%) of the adult population. They thus comprise the fourth largest "religious" tradition in the United States, nearly approximating the number of members of mainline Protestant churches. See Table 1 for further information.

Table 1
Religious Affiliation in the United States

Affiliation by Religion or Church	% US Adults belonging	Affiliation by Religion or Church	% US Adults belonging
Evangelical Protestant	26.3	Mainline Protestant	18.1
Historically Black	6.9	Catholic	23.9
Mormon	1.7	Jehovah's Witnesses	0.7
Orthodox	0.6	Other Christian	0.3
Jewish	1.7	Buddhist	0.7
Muslim	0.6	Hindu	0.4
Other World Religions	<.3	Other Faiths	1.2
Unaffiliated	16.1	Don't Know/Refused	0.8

Evangelical and Mainline Protestant Churches

Within Evangelical churches, the largest reported tradition were Baptist (primarily Southern Baptists: 6.7%). Nondenominational traditions (including evangelical, charismatic and fundamentalist traditions) and Pentecostals (including Assemblies of God, Church of God Cleveland Tennessee, Four Square Gospel, and others) were next with 3.4% of the population each. The Evangelical Anglican/Episcopal tradition, which is much in the news regarding its challenging of mainline Episcopal doctrine and practice, is less than .3% of the population. The Presbyterian Church in America (.4% of US adults) falls within the evangelical Presbyterian tradition. See Table 2 for further information on evangelical Protestant churches. Mainline Protestant church affiliations are reported in Table 3. See the Pew Forum website for religious tradition or affiliation by state, and the percentage of each state's population within a particular religious tradition or affiliation.

Table 2
Evangelical Protestant Churches

Affiliation by Tradition	% US Adults belonging	Affiliation by Tradition	% US Adults belonging
Baptist	10.8	Congregationalist	0.3
Methodist	0.3	Holiness	1
Nondenominational	3.4	Reformed	<.3
Lutheran	1.8	Adventist	0.5
Presbyterian	0.8	Anabaptist	<.3
Pentecostal	3.4	Pietist	<.3
Anglican/Episcopal	<.3	Fundamentalist	1.2
Restorationist	1.7	Protestant nonspecific	1.9

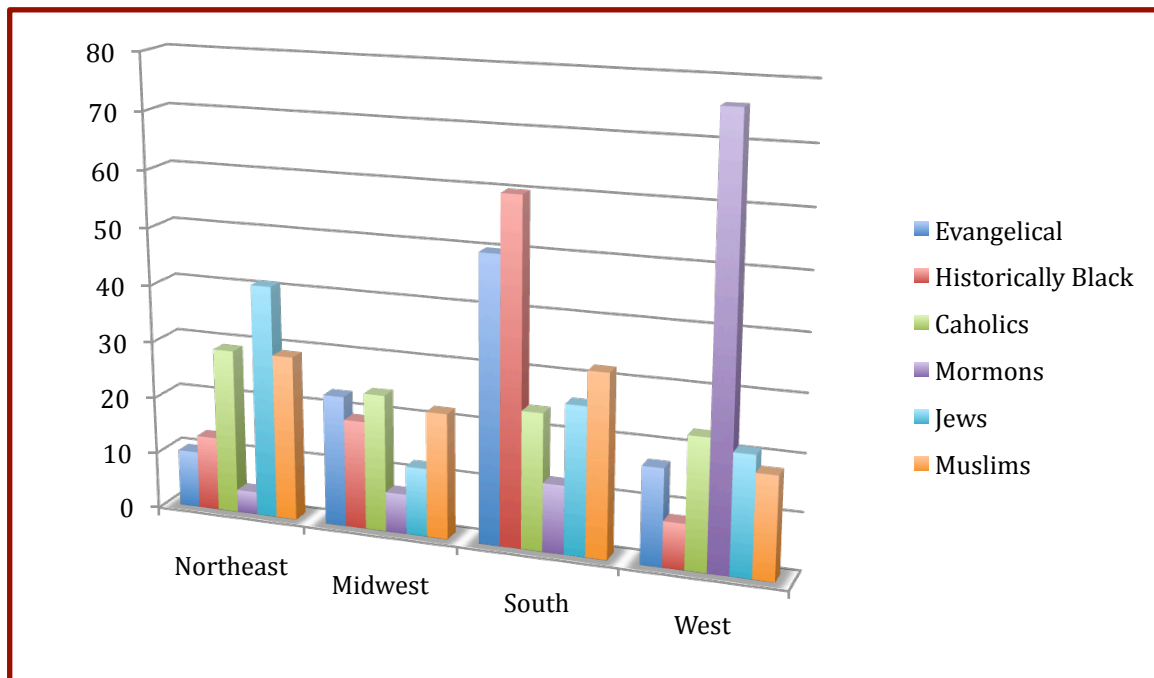
Table 3
Mainline Protestant Churches

Affiliation by Tradition	% US Adults belonging	Affiliation by Tradition	% US Adults belonging
Baptist	1.9	Restorationist	0.4
Methodist	5.4	Congregationalist	0.7
Nondenominational	0.9	Reformed	<.3
Lutheran	2.8	Anabaptist	<.3
Presbyterian	1.9	Friends	<.3
Anglican/Episcopal	1.4	Other/nonspecific	2.5

Religious Traditions by Geographic Regions

When you look at the regional distribution of some of the above noted religious traditions, there are some striking geographic patterns. Evangelicals are mostly found in the South (50%); with in the least numbers of Evangelicals in the Northeast (10%). Catholics are almost evenly distributed by region (Northeast 29%, Midwest 24%, South 24%, and West 23%). Mormons are overwhelmingly in the West (76%); as Jews are in the Northeast (41%). Historically Black churches are primarily in the South (60%). Muslims are mostly in the Northeast (29%) and South (32%). See Figure 1 below for the comparisons.

Figure 1



See the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey for more information on the demographics of religious traditions such as regional and age distribution; gender and race composition; income and educational distribution; and marital status. There is also information on Social and Political views by religious tradition.

Religious Beliefs and Practices

Belief in God/Universal Spirit

Americans are overwhelmingly certain that there is a God or Universal Spirit. Eighty eight percent of Americans are "absolutely certain" or "fairly certain" there is a God or Universal Spirit. Ninety percent of those who are members of Evangelical, and Historically Black churches, and Mormons are "absolutely certain" there is a God or Universal Spirit.

Mainline Protestants (73%) and Catholics (72%) are closer to the national percentages (71%) of Americans who are “absolutely certain” there is a God or Universal Spirit. Jehovah’s Witnesses (93%) had the highest percentage of persons stating they were absolutely certain that God or a Universal Spirit exists. See Table 4 below.

Table 4

Affiliation	Absolutely Certain	Fairly Certain	Not Sure	Don’t Believe	Don’t Know No Answer
National	71%	17%	4%	5%	3%
Evangelical	90%	8%	1%	0%	1%
Mainline	73%	21%	3%	1%	2%
Catholic	72%	21%	4%	1%	2%
Black	90%	7%	1%	0%	1%
Mormon	90%	8%	1%	0%	0%
Jeh. Witnesses	93%	4%	1%	0%	2%

Importance of Religion

The same relative pattern is noticeable with the importance of religion to one’s life. Four out of five or more of persons affiliated with Evangelical and Historically Black churches, as well as Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses believe religion is very important to their life. Those affiliated with Mainline (52%) and Catholic (56%) churches approximate the national figures of those who believe that religion is very important in their life (56%). See Table 5 below.

Table 5

Affiliation	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Too Important	Don't Know No Answer
National	56%	26%	16%	1%
Evangelical	79%	17%	3%	1%
Mainline	52%	35%	12%	1%
Catholic	56%	34%	9%	1%
Black	85%	13%	2%	0%
Mormon	83%	13%	4%	0%
Jeh. Witnesses	86%	10%	2%	1%

Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services

Catholics (9%) are less likely to attend religious service more than once per week than Mormon (31%), Evangelical (30%), and Historically Black (30%) church members. Seventy one percent of Jehovah's Witnesses report attending religious services more than once per week. When attendance data is combined for three categories, nationally, 54% of Americans report attending church at least once per month. This compares to the members of Evangelical (72%), Mainline (53%), Catholic (60%) and Historically Black (75%) churches, as well as Mormons (84%) and Jehovah's Witnesses (85%). See Figure 2 for the comparisons.

Frequency of Prayer

Again, Jehovah's Witnesses (89%) report the highest percentage of daily prayer, followed by Mormons (82%), members of Historically Black churches (80%), Evangelicals (78%), Catholics (58%) and Mainline Protestants (53%). See Figure 3 for comparisons.

Figure 2
Attending Religious Services

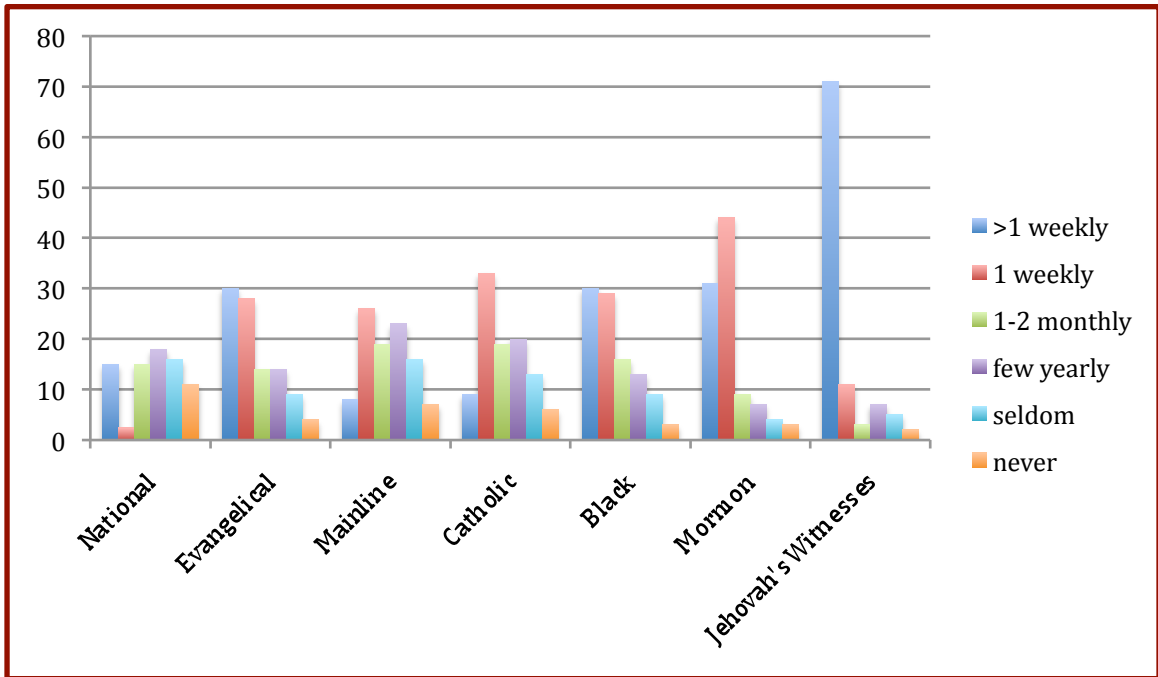
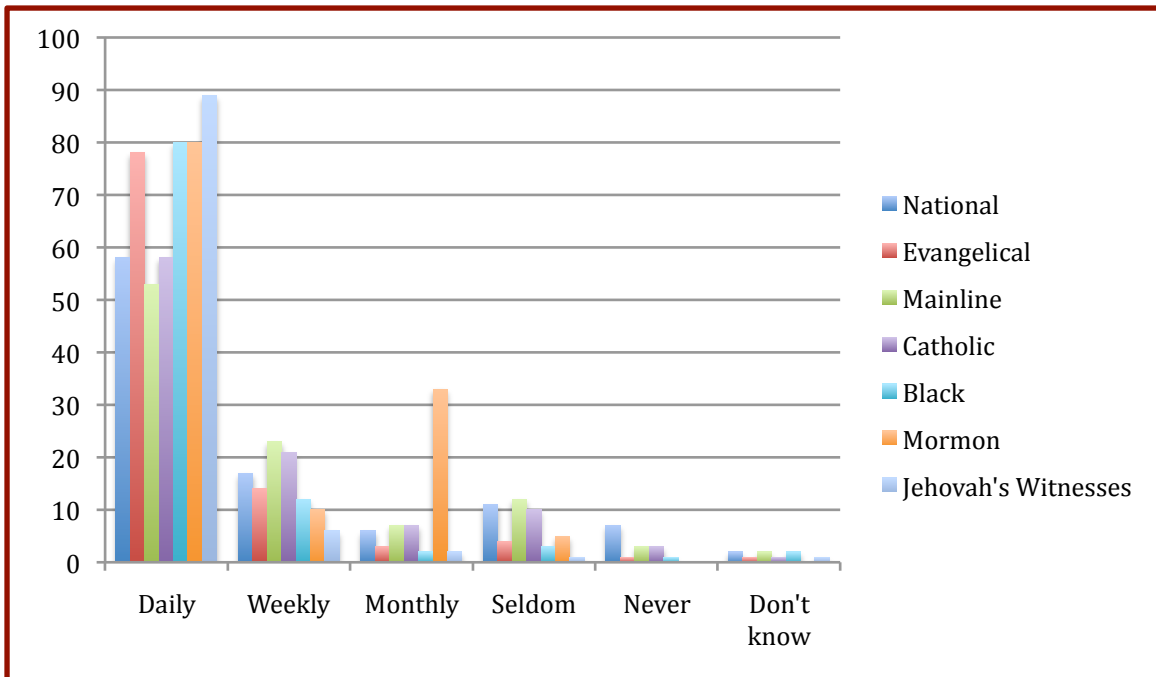


Figure 3
Frequency of Prayer



Summary of Religious Beliefs and Practices

Jehovah's Witnesses consistently reported a greater amount of devotion to religious beliefs and practices (belief in God, the importance of religion, frequency of attendance at religious services and the frequency of prayer) than other religious groups reviewed here. Historically Black churches and Mormons had a slight devotional edge over Evangelical Protestants. Mainline Protestants and Catholics were typically near the national totals.

See the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey of religious beliefs and practices for information on the literal interpretation of Scripture; interpreting religious teachings; and viewing one's religion as the one truth.