

Editorial: Religious landscape isn't as bleak as the numbers appear

May 21, 2015

The latest paint-by-numbers picture of the Texas religious landscape looks similar to, but subtly different than, the national mural. What you see in them depends upon how you look at them.

The Pew Research Center provided the numbers in its new [2014 Religious Landscape Study](#). The survey provides a real-time picture of religious life in the United States. And when compared to a similar study conducted in 2007, it reveals trends in how Americans identify with their faith.



Editor Marv KnoxThe two most significant numbers—reported widely since the Pew Center released its study—paint a startling picture of religious change across the nation.

First, the proportion of Americans who identify as Christians declined by almost 8 points—from 78.4 percent to 70.6 percent. In Texas, the drop was just as sharp, 8 points, but the numbers were higher—81 percent in 2007 and 73 percent in 2014.

Second, the share of Americans who claim no religious affiliation, the so-called nones, including atheists, agnostics and people who describe their

faith as “nothing in particular,” grew at nearly the same rate as Christians declined, 6.7 points—from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent of the national population. The rise of Texas nones increased a little less markedly, 6 points—from 12 percent to 18 percent.

Nationally, mainline Protestants and Catholics suffered the greatest losses. Mainline identification fell 3.4 points—from 18.1 percent of the population to 14.7 percent. Roman Catholics dropped 3.1 points—from 23.9 percent of the whole to 20.8 percent. In Texas, Mainliners declined 2 points—from 15 percent to 13 percent, while Catholics lost 1 point—from 24 percent to 23 percent.

Texas data broken out in BGCT chart

Clay Price, information analyst for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, extracted the Texas data from the larger study. For a comparison of the major state and national data from 2007 and 2014, see [a full-size version of his color-coded chart here](#).

Price’s examination shows evangelical Christians—which include Baptists for the purposes of the study—remain the largest religious group in Texas. However, Texas evangelicals declined by 3 points—from 34 percent to 31 percent. Nationally, Evangelicals account for 25 percent of the population, a one-point drop from 2007.

Black Protestants comprise 6 percent of both the Texas and U.S. populations. They sustained a two-point drop in the state and a one-point drop nationally.

Across the state, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Buddhists and “other faiths” held steady, each comprising 1 percent of the population in both the 2014 and ’07 surveys. Muslims grew from less than 1 percent to 1 percent during that time, as did believers who hold to “other Christian” faiths.

Interpretation depends on perspective

As with many paintings, interpretation of this landscape depends upon the viewer's perspective.

A significant number of pundits and headline writers saw those big, bright numbers—the 8 point drop in the percentage of Christians and the 7 point rise of the nones—and declared the decline of American Christianity. While the drop is grievous to evangelicals who desire all people to embrace Jesus, Christianity's demise is greatly exaggerated.

For example, a trio of scholars from Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion—Rodney Stark, Gordon Melton and Byron Johnson—have surmised the size of the group who claim no religious affiliation, the nones, [is inflated](#). They contend the group includes believers who do not affiliate with any particular institution. So, they do not show up in the conventional Christian categories. (To read a *Huffington Post* article about their interpretation, [click here](#).)

Similarly, an analysis in *The Atlantic* documents subtle nuances of Americans who decline to claim a faith. Of survey respondents who indicated they do not identify with any particular religion, 44 percent said religion is “very” or “somewhat” important to them. (To read *The Atlantic* analysis, [click here](#).)

Ross Douthat, the conservative Catholic columnist for the *New York Times*, finds at least two problems with the scary-picture scenario. “What's in steepest decline is affiliation, not religious practice,” he insists. People who formerly claimed to be Christian because it was socially expected have dropped the pretense. But regular weekly church attendance fell only two points, from 39 percent of Americans to 37 percent, in the decade from 2003 to 2013. America is losing its pretend-Christians but not its core-Christians, he says.

He also articulates what practically every pastor and active church volunteer knows: “So much depends upon how and when and whether the Millennials grow up.” Historically, significant percentages of young adults drop out of church when they graduate from high school but show back up when it’s time to raise their children. The question is whether this generation of young adults, more secular than their predecessors, will follow suit. As Price notes, more than a third of Americans age 18 to 24 do not affiliate with any faith community. (To read Douthat’s observations, [click here](#).)

The take-aways

Professors, pastors and pundits will be parsing this study for a long time. It weighs in at 200 pages and provides bountiful material for assessing the status of religion in America. (By the way, for a look at the Texas page of the study, [click here](#).)

Baptists and other evangelical Christians, of all people, can look at the numbers and lose heart. But we are called to be faithful and to place our trust in God. Here are a couple of take-aways from the study:

- Trends are hard to turn, but people are people. A person does not make an ultimate decision because she is part of a category. A decision—particularly to accept or reject Jesus—is personal. Usually, it’s made in the context of a relationship with a Christian. The more unbelievers we meet, the more opportunities they have to realize—through our actions—God loves them.
- All other groups aside, the 44 percent of the religiously unaffiliated who say religion is important to them comprise a huge mission field. We’re talking about millions of fellow Americans. They’ve already said they value faith. We have the opportunity to help them embrace it. And when they do, they can become the key witnesses to their unaffiliated

friends and family.