

#1

Q: What is the largest religious group in contemporary America?

A: According to the [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#), evangelical Protestants currently comprise the largest religious cohort in America at slightly over one-quarter (26.3%) of the adult population. Running a close second are Catholics at 23.9%. Next are mainline Protestants (18.1%), then the “unaffiliated” (16.1%) and historic black churches (6.9%).

Other religious groups are far behind: Jews (1.7%), Mormons (1.7%), Buddhists (0.7%), Muslims (0.6%), and Hindus (0.4%). All other faiths (Unitarians, New Age, Native American, and other world religions) combined come in at 1.5%.

Even though three-quarters of the adult population still identify themselves as Christians, such figures hardly tell the whole story. As anyone who has consulted the Yellow Pages knows, the “Christian” category includes hundreds of different denominations and independent churches, each with their own stories, traditions, and connections. If one digs into the Survey’s detailed analysis, one finds the relative strength of America’s religious “families” and how difficult it is to draw clear lines between them. For example, Baptist denominations can be counted among three different Protestant cohorts—the evangelicals, the mainline Protestants, and the historically black churches. Thus, in addition to being diverse, American religion is also fragmented.

Can we expect the evangelicals to retain their #1 position for long? No one knows for sure. As this Survey and other research show, there is movement within virtually all religious groups, with nearly half of those surveyed having joined, left, or switched religious affiliations. Especially troublesome to all organized religious groups is the growing number of young adults who have dropped their earlier allegiances and joined the ranks of the Unaffiliated, which is the fastest growing “religious” cohort in the Survey.

To say the least, it is hard to be definitive about the current role of religion in American culture when its religious landscape keeps changing, when one decade’s “winners” may quickly turn into the next decade’s “losers.” If one recognizes that America has a “free-market religious economy,” then one has to be ready for shifting “market shares.”

Nobody ever said this was going to be easy.

#2

Q: Who are the “Nones”—the “No Religion” people in the U.S.?

A: In another significant poll on American religion (54,461 interviews), the [American Religious Identification Survey 2008 \(ARIS\)](#) found that 15% of the U.S. population were “nones,” people who reported “no religion.” Such findings were nearly the same as the 16.1% identified as “unaffiliated” in Pew’s [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#).

Both surveys reported that people in the U.S. are becoming less religious than in the past. In 1990 8.2% were nones, 14.1% in 2001, and 15% in 2008. But the rate of change has slowed considerably. During the “secular boom” of the 1990s, on average each year 1.3 million adults dropped their religious affiliations. Since 2001, the rate has held steady at 660,000 per year.

Men are more likely to be nones than women (19% vs. 12% of the total adult population); and the gender ratio of men to women in this category is 60 to 40.

Most nones were not raised that way: only 32% of current nones had no religious affiliation at age 12. That means that most nones came to “no religion” from an earlier religious affiliation.

One quarter (24%) of nones is comprised of former Catholics. Among first generation nones, the percentage increases to more than one-third (35%).

Race and ethnicity are significant factors. Asians are much more likely to declare no religion than other ethnic groups, though Jews and Irish also are among the most secular. Latinos have increased their proportion of nones from 4% to 12% since 1990.

Politically speaking, in 2008 21% of independents were nones, 16% were Democrats, and 8% were Republicans. In 1990, the numbers were much lower: 12% of independents, 6% of Democrats, and 6% of Republicans.

Though 15% of the adult population self-identify as nones, of those between 18 and 29, the figure is much higher—22%.

Here is the obvious target group for growth-minded religious folks. Because most nones left a particular religion to become “no religion,” re-conversion will not be easy.

#3

Q: How many atheists are there in America?

A: In the last few years, atheists seem to be everywhere. They are on cable TV and late-night network talk shows. They put up billboards and advertise on buses. They even file lawsuits. Their books make best-seller lists with titles like *The God Delusion*, *God Is Not Great*, *Atheist Universe*, *The End of Faith*, and *Does God Get Diarrhea? Flushing 4000 Years of Lies, Myths, and Fairy Tales Down the Toilet*, which did not sell as many books as the others, but deserves some kind of award for crass creativity.

Atheists have organized into groups like American Atheists (founded by Madalyn Murray O’Hair), Atheists United, and the Atheist Alliance International. Their spokespersons like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris are good at making believers angry.

The defenders of theism have counterpunched with books, TV appearances, and billboards of their own. Given all the energy expended by both sides, one might conclude that atheism in America has now reached epidemic proportions and poses a real threat to the Christian majority.

Hardly. According to the recent [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#), atheists barely show up on the radar screen. At only 1.6% of the adult population, atheists number less than Jews (1.7%) or Mormons (1.7%). Of course, atheism’s influence is enhanced by the company it keeps. Atheists often find common ground with self-identified agnostics (2.4%) and the other “unaffiliated” who calls themselves “secular” (6.3%). Together these three groups support efforts to drive religion out of the public square, even though they comprise only 10% of the adult population. As should be plain by now, sometimes religious minorities outmaneuver religious majorities. Atheists are not numerous enough to out-vote believers in a head-to-head contest, but they are large enough and well-connected to make lots of noise, get noticed by the media, and sometimes get their way. Stay tuned.