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Religious Diversity in North America : More or Less Accommodating?

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IS RELIGION ON THE RISE OR ON THE DECLINE?

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of how we classify the tens of millions Americans professing no religion, as non-identifiers with a religion or as un-affiliated with any organized religious group, clearly this segment of the population is substantial and has grown considerably since 1990. This paper measures secularization of the U.S. public along the three dimensions of belonging, belief and behavior. It offers new research methodologies to study religion in America. In particular it shows new ways to measure religious identification and religious behavior. The data sources include a large national survey, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2001, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics Time-Use Surveys 2003-2006.

In an attempt to determine whether religion is on the rise or on the decline, this paper measures secularization of the U.S. public along the three dimensions of belonging, belief and behavior. Each dimension contributes to understanding secularization because the three are by no means strictly correlated: Americans who appear to be secular by belonging may appear religious by belief, or vice versa. Others may appear religious by belonging and belief, but secular by behavior, and so on.

Belonging

The traditional way to measure religious belonging is by membership in a congregation or religious institution. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2001, a nationally representative telephone survey of more than 50,000 respondents, found that 46% of American adults, or nearly 100 million people, did not claim membership in any religious institution (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006).

An alternative measure is religious or non-religious identification. The key open-ended self-identification question in ARIS was: What is your religion, if any? It yielded 13% "none," and additional 1% for the combination of "agnostic," "atheist," "secular" and "humanist." In all, the responses categorized as "No Religion" amounted to 14.1% of the American adult population, or about 29.5 million people. This finding was corroborated by the General Social Survey (GSS) in 2004. GSS, conducted by NORC, asked: "what is your religious preference?" and 14.3% said "none." This is a sharp increase from the 1990 National Survey of Religious Identification (NSRI), in which 8.2% self-reported as no religion (Kosmin and Lachman, 1993), and the GSS in 1985, in which 7% were identified as "professing no religious preference."

(Dis)Belief

The American public overwhelmingly is a society of believers. Only 5%, or an estimated 9.6 million adult Americans, disagree "strongly" or "somewhat," that God exists, according to ARIS 2001. (This group is five times the number of self-identified atheists and agnostics.) The American Religious Identification Survey showed the lack of congruence between having a religious identification and believing in God. To illustrate, 34% of adults who disagree "somewhat" or "strongly" that God exists self-identify with a religious group.

The Harris Poll reported a drop in the number of people who believe in God since 2003. In particular, those who are absolutely sure there is God dropped from 66% of adults in 2003 to 58% in 2006. Older Americans are more likely to be sure of God's existence.

We classify those who do not agree that God exists (either "somewhat" or "strongly") as "non-believers." Religion in a Free Market (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006) showed that "non-believers" are not a unique group. They are found among Jews (14%) and those who identify with Eastern religions

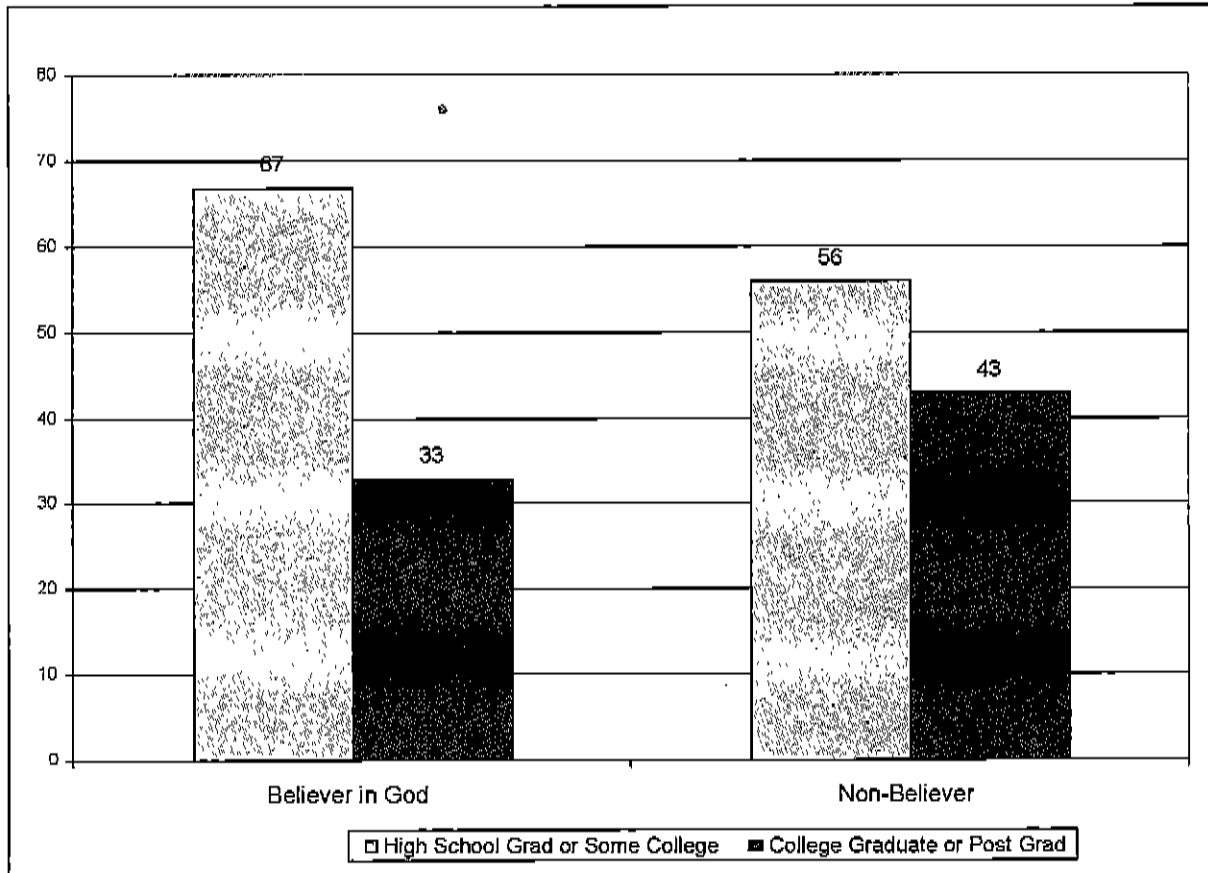
(12%). The socio-demographic profile of non-believers is of special interest.

In the following sections, we compare non-believers (measured on the dimension of belief) to agnostics,

atheists, and "nones" (measured on the dimension of belonging).

Profile of non-believers

Chart 1: Educational level of believers and non-believers



Source: American Religious Identification Survey, 2001

Gender: Non-believers are predominantly men – 65%. Men make up 70% of self-identified atheists and 75% of self-identified agnostics (Kysar, 2007).

Age: American non-believers are quite similar in age to self-identified agnostics but older than atheists.

Education: Non-believers have a higher educational level than believers in general. As shown in Chart 1, 43% of non-believers are college graduates or have post-graduate education. They resemble self-identified agnostics (as shown in Chart 2 on page 3). The non-believers in Chart 1 also exhibit higher educational attainment than self-identified atheists and “nones” from Chart 2.

Geography: The geographic distribution of non-believers is similar to that of those who profess no religion and of self-identified agnostics. We are more likely to find them in the West and the Northeast and less likely to find them in the South.

Politics: Similar to the geographic distribution, party political preferences of non-believers are quite similar to those of self-identified agnostics and the “no religion” group.

Non-believers are more likely to be politically independent, not too different from self-identified atheists.

In sum: non-believers are typically

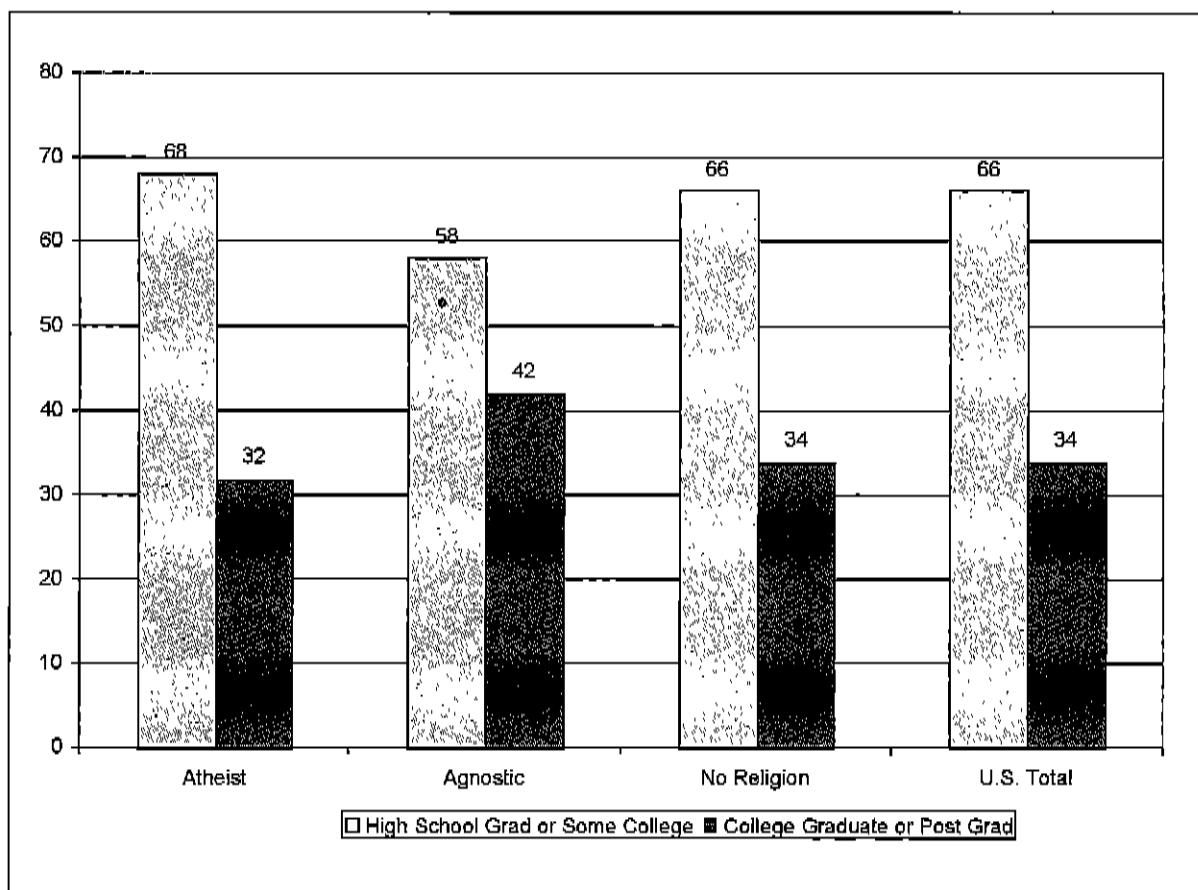
- male
- young
- Asian
- college graduates
- residents of the West
- politically independent

Behavior

A classical way to assess religiosity is to measure participation in religious activities. This involves both private kinds of worship, such as praying alone, reading religious texts, or watching religious programs on TV, and public activities, such as attending services, Bible study, or praying with others.

In the United States, it has long been claimed that more than 40% of the population attend services weekly. These reports, dated since the 1950s, have been cited often as an

Chart 2: Educational level of self-identifying Atheist, Agnostic and No Religion



Source: American Religious Identification Survey, 2001

indicator of the high level of religiosity in the U.S. However, such reports were challenged on the claim that it is physically impossible for church buildings to accommodate such a high number of worshippers. Rather than relying on exaggerated self-reporting, Hadaway, Marler & Chaves (1993) used actual counts of attendance at services. They suggested a lower estimate of 23%.

Sociologists of religion had to look for an alternative method of data collection which minimizes social desirability bias and the tendency to inflate the frequency of weekly worship attendance. Presser and Stinson (1998) showed that using time-use surveys, in which respondents report on all their daily activities, religious and non-religious, can achieve this purpose.

In the time-use survey conducted for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), respondents (aged 15 years and over) were interviewed and reported their activities for a 24-hour period from 4a.m. the previous day until 4a.m. on the day of the interview. If respondents reported doing more than one activity at a time, they were asked to identify which activity was primary. Activities were grouped into 17 primary categories.

The BLS data from 2003-2006, including almost 15,000 respondents, allow us to measure religious behavior on different dimensions: participation in religious practices (both private and public) and attendance in religious

services. It also offers us the unique opportunity to concentrate on one important day – Sunday.

The evolution of the American Sunday

De Tocqueville, discussing the reality of Sunday observance during his visit to the United States in 1831-32, describes one large city: "You can hear neither the movements of industry, nor the accents of joy, nor even the confused murmur that arises from the midst of a great city. Chains are hung across the streets in the neighborhood of the churches; the half-closed shutters of the houses scarcely admit a ray of sun into the dwellings of the citizens. Now and then you perceive a solitary individual, who glides silently along the deserted streets and lanes. But on Monday at early dawn the rolling of carriages, the noise of hammers, the cries of the population, begin again to make themselves heard. The city is awake once more." (De Tocqueville, 1835/1994, p. 343).

As De Tocqueville observed, Sundays in America were once intensely religious. Historical and societal changes occurred in the past hundred years which facilitated the secularization of the American Sunday. Business organizations as well as secular organizations transformed Sunday by gradually eliminating Sunday Blue Laws. The Blue Laws made the Lord's Day of Sabbath sacred by forbidding work, sport or recreation, thus formalizing a tradition of observance on Sundays.

The elimination of blue laws has several social and economic implications. Once the social controls are relaxed, behaviors are expected to change. Religion no longer has a monopoly on people's time and entertainment. In fact, the church has to compete for people's time and attention. Consequently, there are important symbolic meanings which make religion more privatized. Individuals are forced to make decisions where and when to worship (or not at all). In addition, for some segments of society, due to economic pressures, Sunday becomes a day of work. Therefore, very different from the Sunday observed by De Tocqueville, at the twenty first century, Sunday has become a mixed-use day, combining work, worship and entertainment. In reality, the evolution of Sunday tells the story of the U.S. secularization.

Attendance at religious services

Attendance in religious services on Sundays involves only 25% of the American population. It is far closer to the figure cited by Hadaway, Marler & Chaves (1993). The traditional gender gap persists, whereby only 22% of men compared with 28% of women attend religious services on a typical Sunday. This is based on Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey 2003-2006 and refers to individuals age 15 and over (Beit-Hallahmi, Keysar, and Kosmin, 2007).

Conclusion

One consequence of a free market in beliefs and ideas is a proliferation of religious choices. In this paper we look at changes shaping American religion alongside of the three B's (belonging, belief and behavior). They reveal three trajectories – all exhibiting the same trend.

This paper offers alternative methods to measure religious identification and religious behavior. To illustrate, ARIS 2001 data are based on self-reporting and an open-ended question. This methodology incorporates pluralistic and democratic values best suited for contemporary diverse U.S. society.

On the other hand, reliability on self-reporting of religious practices are shown to be misleading and exaggerated. Thus the alternative measures based on time-use data; used here, provide less biased results and present lower rates of church attendance, which support the claim of a continuing secularization process in the U.S.

Finally, regardless of how we classify the tens of millions Americans professing no religion, as non-identifiers with a religion or as un-affiliated with any organized religious group, clearly the secular segment of the population is substantial and has grown considerably since 1990.

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