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# Opinion | The Largest and Fastest Religious Shift in America Is Well Underway

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*This is the fourth newsletter in a series about Americans moving away from religion. Read [part one](#), [part two](#) and [part three](#).*

In previous newsletters about Americans falling away from religion, I've talked about why so many Americans' religious identities now fall in the category known as "nones" when, just a half-century ago, nearly all Americans had some kind of affiliation. (It's complicated and multifaceted, but to summarize, it's largely a combination of [Christianity's association with far-right politics](#) and the fact that being unreligious has become more socially acceptable over time.)

But it's not just how Americans identify that has greatly shifted. In their new book "The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?" Jim Davis and Michael Graham with Ryan Burge argue that the most dramatic change may be in regular attendance at houses of

worship. “We are currently in the middle of the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country,” they postulate, because “about 15 percent of American adults living today (around 40 million people) have effectively stopped going to church, and most of this dechurching has happened in the past 25 years.”

While the authors find that there is some variation in the rates at which different demographic groups are dechurching (Hispanic Americans are dechurching at the lowest rate, for example), every group is trending away from traditional worship. As Davis, Graham and Burge put it: “No theological tradition, age group, ethnicity, political affiliation, education level, geographic location or income bracket escaped the dechurching in America.”

The authors focus on Christians in part because there are far more Christians in America than there are people of any other faith background. But the book also has an aim that I don’t have: It argues for bringing dechurched Americans back to regular worship. (The three men who worked on the book are all pastors.) The data they shared with me suggests that “dechurching” is particularly prevalent among Buddhists and Jews, with nearly half not attending worship services regularly, and around 30 percent of most Christian denominations and around 20 percent of Mormons and Orthodox Christians. (There weren’t enough Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the sample for statistical certainty.)

When I queried Times readers [about moving away from religion](#) — over [7,000 responded](#) — I asked whether they missed anything about traditional religious observance and, if they did, what rituals had replaced regular church, temple or mosque attendance for them. (A reminder here that these readers aren’t a demographically representative sample of Americans — for

instance, while there was a good deal of geographic, racial and religious diversity among the respondents overall, almost all of the readers I talked to were college educated.)

Some people, usually self-described atheists and agnostics, said they didn't miss anything and were happy to be rid of anything resembling worship. Unsurprisingly, those groups had the highest rate of dechurching of all: 94 percent for atheists and 88 percent for agnostics.

But many said they did miss aspects of traditional attendance, and often these people still believed in God or certain aspects of their previous faith traditions. They'd sought replacements for traditional worship, and the most common were spending time in nature, meditation and physical activity — basically anything that got them out of their own heads and the anxieties of the material world.

Kathy Keller, 60, who lives in Michigan and left the Catholic Church because of its child sex abuse scandals and intrusion into health care that adversely affects women, has had a fairly representative experience. She said that while she no longer goes to church regularly, she still believes in a higher power and prays occasionally. "I try to spend Sunday morning outside appreciating the glory of nature," she said.

Others are trying to forge new kinds of religious paths for themselves. One example is the trend of mostly younger Americans who are "deconstructing" Christianity, and as my newsroom colleague Ruth Graham [explained](#) this year, "deconstruction has a broad range of definitions and outcomes, from understanding more about a faith once accepted uncritically to full abandonment of religious belief."

The process of deconstructing Christianity, at least the way many creators express it on TikTok and Instagram, often begins with questioning the conservative racial, gender, political and sexual attitudes of the churches they were raised in — an approach that has particular relevance right now: Just last week, the Southern Baptist Convention [voted to bar women](#) from its pastorate.

Donnell McLachlan, 29, who lives in Chicago, has been sharing the story of his deconstruction on TikTok [@donnellwrites](#), where he has nearly 250,000 followers, since 2021. He was brought up in what he describes as a small Black church on the South Side of Chicago in the Pentecostal and Apostolic traditions. Though he says the church did a lot for him and his family when he was growing up, he came to feel that it was a faith rooted in fear and judgment.

“I started to notice the distance between what we professed and what we actually did,” he told me, especially when it came to women, the L.G.B.T.Q. community and Black Lives Matter. For a while, he and his wife tried attending a different church that seemed more modern, but, McLachlan said, “I started to see a lot of the same patterns” of religious conservatism “that were just repackaged in a kind of shiny cool way.” During this process, McLachlan was at a seminary, and thought he was going to complete a master’s in divinity and become a pastor, but, he said, as he learned more about Christianity’s history and its connection to the legacy of colonialism, he switched to a research track and graduated with a master’s in religious studies instead.

McLachlan said he now describes himself as a “spiritual pluralist” rather than a Christian, though he still embraces some rituals from his Christian heritage, like prayer, gospel music and “drawing upon

the love-rooted, justice-centered wisdom found in the Bible.” He said: “Religion is like a language, a means of communicating with the divine. And just like language, there are many interpretations and ways to express it. I believe that love is the ultimate law of life, and try to align my spiritual practices with traditions that reflect this belief.” McLachlan added that he has found a reservoir of grace and compassion in his online community: “Sharing my story and uplifting others’ stories has been its own beautiful kind of ritual.”

Jill Fioravanti, 45, who lives in Maryland, is another example of a reader seeking a new kind of interfaith community. Fioravanti “was bat mitzvahed at a Conservative Jewish synagogue and was involved in Hillel at my university but became disillusioned when I could not find a rabbi who would conduct an interfaith marriage ceremony for me and my husband, who is Catholic,” she said.

When she and her husband started having children, they struggled to figure out what to do about religion. For a while, they considered alternating religions — as in, the first child would be raised Catholic, the second Jewish and the third Catholic. They decided that wasn’t the right fit for their family, but they still wanted “a religious, educational and spiritual home.” Fioravanti searched around and found [the Interfaith Families Project](#), which was founded in 1995 by four moms based in the Washington, D.C., area.

The organization has a rabbi and a reverend, community gatherings and a Sunday school where children learn about both Judaism and Christianity. Instead of preparation for a bar or bat mitzvah, it offers a coming-of-age program in which kids do a two-year project in seventh and eighth grade wrestling with six big questions: “Who am I? What does it mean to live a meaningful

life? How do we build the beloved community? Why do bad things happen? Is there an afterlife? Who or what is God?” Fioravanti, who leads the organization’s board, feels her kids are learning “core values and principles that make for a good human.”

One of the main qualifications readers seem to be looking for in their new spiritual communities is something that is less exclusionary than the denominations they were raised in. But it’s precisely the more “dogmatic” denominations and religious sects that are better able to keep adherents, according to Merrill Silverstein, a sociologist at Syracuse University who has studied five generations of the same Southern California families since 1971. Mormons and evangelical Christians were able to recreate themselves more strongly across generations in their sample than Jews, mainline Protestants and Catholics, Silverstein said. Meanwhile, “the secular, the anti-religious or nonreligious people are producing nonreligious, anti-religious children,” Silverstein told me. It’s creating a new and more polarized religious landscape in our country than what we’ve had before.

Graham, a co-author of “The Great Dechurching” and a program director for [the Keller Center](#), used the analogy of a wall: If you have a “high wall” tradition, it’s a higher barrier to entry, but also a higher barrier to leave. He thinks the religions with clear visions of the kinds of ethics they expect, clarity of doctrine and strongly encouraged in-person worship will be stickier.

I asked whether he thought the trend of falling away from regular attendance at traditional houses of worship would continue at its rapid clip. He said he thinks it eventually has to slow down, because so many people will become dechurched that there won’t be enough traditionally observant Americans left to keep up the

pace. And he agreed with Silverstein that dechurched Americans will have “unchurched” or fully irreligious children. He summed it up this way: “I think the religious disaffiliation as a cultural phenomenon will continue.”

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