

Religious disaffiliation has been increasing in recent years, especially among

- white Protestants
 - The decline in affiliation is slower among evangelical Protestants than among mainline Protestants, but is still a decline.
 - The situation is less clear among Catholics, although white non-Hispanic Catholics show marked increase in non-attendance and affiliation, while Hispanic Catholics (especially recent immigrants) have a higher rate of affiliation and observance.
- men more than women (although this has been changing in recent years as women perform more of the roles and socio-economic functions traditionally dominated by men)
- younger age cohorts (especially those under age 30), although members of older age cohorts have also shown an increased tendency to disaffiliate in recent years
 - Having two married parents who are active in the same church community and do not divorce may support a child's continued religious affiliation as an adult.
 - Perceived universalizability of religious norms
 - Contrast this with disaffiliation following religious difference among parents and interacting with religious pluralism in society, where the opposite occurs, i.e. there is no social reinforcement for church rules due to declining social integration.
 - Active or intensive church attendance at ages 12 and 16 tends to support continued affiliation as an adult.
 - Sunday school attendance does not affect continued religious affiliation in adulthood and religious schooling is not important for Protestants but has a marginal effect on adult Mass attendance for Catholics.
- raised in more pluralistic (religiously diverse) environments OR belong to a high-commitment religious community which is more dissonant with the broader society
- have grown up in a family where one parent
 - was not religiously affiliated
 - was not present in the household (divorce during one's childhood or growing up in a single parent household)
- have non-traditional family relationships (cohabitation apart from marriage, same-sex relationships, believe extra-marital sexual relationships are justified/normative)
- engage in behavior not approved by the church (e.g. frequent recreational drug use; in many evangelical churches, divorce)
- major life loss (stressful life events with negative perceptions of control), particularly a serious financial crisis (white men more likely to disaffiliate following this; harder for them to face others following a perceived failure of this type?)
 - A death in the family may also lead to considering disaffiliation, but in some cases may also lead to recommitment or a higher level of commitment, where

other believers regularly visit, listen non-judgmentally (without assuming they understand the situation), pray and provide verbal encouragement and support following the loss.

- Community support is particularly important following a death that might be viewed as shameful by the community (e.g. a death from suicide, drug use, drunk driving or other socially or religiously unapproved behaviors).
- are married to a person with no religion
- are marginal to church life or community (covers a variety of reasons; attendance no longer socially reinforced, so participation will continue on a voluntary basis only among the more highly committed)
- reject religious supernatural beliefs (afterlife, heaven, hell, divine intervention through miracles, etc.)
- have an openness to experience and as a matter of policy, treat beliefs as constantly revisable and always evolving as part of an ongoing process
 - Emphasis on effectiveness without regard for received traditions or opinions of others.

Since the early 1990's, religious affiliation has also rapidly declined among people who are less affluent and educated.

- This represents a significant change from the pattern previously established by the Wesleyan and evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century).

Those who disaffiliate are principally motivated by a desire for freedom (maximizing personal liberties) ("I don't want to feel like I have to edit myself").

- Part of a general trend: declining number of people in the broader society interested in joining voluntary organizations.
- Even though they may sometimes retain vestiges of religious belief, they are relatively uninterested in belonging to a traditional community which asks members to endorse (and subordinate themselves to) shared beliefs and values.
 - By "vestiges of religious belief," I mean that persons who list their religion as "nothing in particular" may
 - retain a vague belief in God or a higher power or an energy in nature,
 - say they are "spiritual but not religious," or
 - accept popular paranormal beliefs (such as believing they have had contact with a deceased family member).
 - Where the notion of community exists, it may be invoked superficially to refer to an online interest group ("online community") or, in a more substantive sense to refer to time with family members or close friends, often accompanied by sharing food and engaging in mutually agreeable recreational activities (rather than formal

activities with non-family members centered on reading sacred texts or engaging in prayer).

- They may offer moral criticism of religious organizations that they regard as
 - too involved in politics and
 - supporting a single vision of morality.

(For some personal reflections on self-conscious departure from Christianity, see exchristian.net and revivalorriots.org.)

There are a number of small-scale studies looking at disaffiliation from conservative religious communities (Protestant fundamentalism, Orthodox Judaism, sectarian communities).

- The interest in these studies is that they track one type of person moving from a high-commitment community to disaffiliation (no commitment).
- The downside is that they may be valid only for certain types of high-commitment sectarian communities and not shed much light on drift away from the church by the broader population.

In these studies of defection from sectarian communities, individuals describe themselves as growing up

- somewhat socially isolated, due in part to dynamics of the sect and the family
- Sect affirms that the good obedient would be rewarded and the bad/disobedient punished, emphasizing a legal account of religion within a closed universe governed by a law of cause and effect (terrible things will occur if law violated)
 - Limitless fear of failing inadvertently and fear of being punished, rejected and abandoned by parents, religious teachers and community.
 - Excessive self-monitoring → Try harder, all my fault, I deserve all the blame, I must break the prideful self.
 - Since God knows every thought that goes through one's mind (doubts, anger, sexual thoughts) and can see if they are sinful, one is never able to relax but feels a constant sense of insecurity within the world and tries to manage this through proving their self-worth by doing good (outward conformity).
 - This, they hope, will all them to avoid the need for self-censure and the rejection (shaming/open conflict) they fear by their parents, religious leaders/teachers, and the religious community.
 - One is always struggling to measure up to the community's standard and if there is even the least failure it should be kept hidden/private and one must work hard to get back into the community's good grace. lest one be rejected/abandoned.
- Members of sect use fear/guilt/shame/even expressions of anger or corporal punishment to secure conformity and handle (not handle) conflict.

- Individual feels different not only within the broader society but also from the beliefs and practices of the sect.
- Individual has few resources to be self-sufficient but tries to find an identity through reading, study and academic success.
 - This may lead to reading non-approved literature and independent pursuit of questions.
- Individual then asks intellectual questions that are dismissed as emotionally based (questions are regarded as challenging religious authorities and speaking from an independent viewpoint, which is unacceptable) and person comes to resent this.
- Cognitive dissonance arises from dissonant experiences of church members/religious leaders (hypocrisy/direct opposition between public profession and private practice, dysfunction, claim to have knowledge one does not have, profession of value of love vs. lack of warmth in family or community, sexual misconduct/sexual abuse by leaders)
- Distrust, enhanced feeling of insecurity within the sect → invoke skeptical attitudes, begin to inwardly engage in moral criticism of the sect
- Development of intellectual autonomy (affective/emotional life may still be underdeveloped), retaining some beliefs while rejecting others and eliminating lifestyle sanctions. (Emphasize individuation of self through rational choice)
- May work through and justify changes by reference to secular professional authorities who can function as “identity experts” (counselor, books on self-help, philosophy and comparative religion), but may still feel some dissonance and internal conflict.
- Loss of certainty/direction, grief/disorientation, loss of relationships or inability to replace relationships.
 - May engage in limitless behavior (“go wild”), while at the same time longing for one’s previous certainty and despairing that one does not have it.
 - Retain old habits from life in the sect, like excessive self-monitoring, denial and splitting
- Contact with skeptical friends and marriage to a non-religious spouse may complete rationalization of disaffiliation.