Introduction

By world standards, the United States is a highly religious country. Almost all Americans say they believe in God, a majority say they pray every day, and a quarter say they attend religious services every week. Some skepticism is appropriate here. It is not always clear what people mean when they say they believe in God or pray, and many people believe in a God that is quite untraditional. Moreover, people do not really go to church as often as they tell pollsters that they go. But even when we take all this into account, Americans still are more pious than people in any Western country, with the possible exception of Ireland.¹

We cannot say anything definitive about very long-term trends in U.S. religious beliefs and practices because high-
quality national surveys do not exist before the middle of the twentieth century. Still, historical studies of local communities suggest that today’s relatively high levels of religiosity have characterized American society from its beginnings. Brooks Holifield, a prominent historian of American religion, put it this way: “For most of the past three hundred years, from 35 to 40 percent of the population has probably participated in congregations with some degree of regularity.” The weekly religious service attendance rate implied by the best national survey in 2014 is within that range: 35 percent. This overstates true weekly attendance because people say that they attend services more often than they really do, but it probably represents fairly the proportion of Americans who participate in congregations more or less regularly. The continuity is striking.

It is tempting to treat any signs of change as mere footnotes to the main story of continuing high levels of American religiosity. But American religion has changed in recent decades, and it is important to clarify what is changing and what is staying the same. As we will see, recent religious trends mainly are slow-moving—even glacial. But slow-moving does not mean unimportant, and long-term, slow social change still can be profound social change. We should not overstate change, but we also should not allow the considerable continuity in American religion to blind us to the real change that has occurred and is occurring. I will try to
strike the right balance between the twin dangers of overstat-
ing and understating recent changes in American religion.

Some of the trends I highlight in this book are well
known. Others are not. This book documents even the
well-known trends in order to provide a stand-alone sum-
mary of important religious change in the United States. I seek to summarize the key big-picture changes in Ameri-
can religion since 1972. I will describe rather than explain,
and I will focus on aggregate national change rather than
differences among subgroups. I do not try to document all
the interesting differences between, say, men and women,
blacks and whites, Christians and Jews, northerners and southerners, liberals and conservatives, or other subgroups
of U.S. residents. I offer no overarching theory or major re-
interpretation. I occasionally will comment on variations
across subgroups of Americans, but only in instances where
knowing about such differences is important to under-
standing the aggregate picture. I occasionally will mention
explanations of the trends, but only when a straightforward
and well-established explanation exists. This book is for those
who do not know, but who want to know, in broad brush,
what is changing and what is not in American religion. Those who want to dig deeper can follow the notes to addi-
tional reading. My goal is to provide key facts so those who
wish to discuss, explain, or debate the state of American
religion over the past few decades can do so knowledgeably.
I keep this book descriptive and aggregate because I want to keep it short. I want to keep it short because I believe this sort of factual summary should be available to the general public. Too often, we develop explanations and interpretations before we are clear about what the facts are. Too often, people interested in basic facts about American religion have to search harder than they should to find an overview they can trust. Too often, teachers who want their students to learn basic facts about American religious change cannot find a source that is inexpensive enough, and short enough, to assign in class. I wanted to keep this book short so that it can inform the maximum number of people about what’s changing and what’s not in American religion. For the same reason, I have erred on the side of including less rather than more methodological detail.

The trends I highlight are not the only important trends in American religion, but they are the best documented. “Best documented” is an important qualifier. I will draw primarily on the two best sources of information about these trends. One source is the General Social Survey (GSS), a survey of the American adult population that has been conducted at least every other year since 1972. The GSS, conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, is by far the best source of available information about continuity and change in Americans’ religiosity over the past four decades. Of course, no survey is perfect. The GSS’s
primary limitation is that, while richly informative, it has not asked people about every religious belief, attitude, or practice we might like to know about. But no other high-quality source contains as much information about American religion over as many years, and so describing the best documented trends means relying primarily on the GSS.4

The other primary source I will use heavily is the National Congregations Study (NCS), a national survey of local religious congregations from across the religious spectrum. The NCS surveys, which I directed, were conducted in 1998, 2006, and 2012 in collaboration with NORC at the University of Chicago. These congregation surveys do not go back in time as far as the GSS, but they offer the best information we have about congregational change since 1998.5

There is judgment involved in deciding what counts as stability and what counts as change. Does the four-point difference between, say, the 95 percent of people who said in 1988 that they believe in God and the 91 percent who said so in 2014 represent stability or a small decline? Does the three-point difference between the 76 percent of people who said in 1973 that they believe in life after death and the 79 percent who said so in 2014 represent stability or a small increase? “Statistical significance” is not enough of a guide, since even trivial differences can be statistically significant if the samples are large enough. Generally, I will call something a trend only if change in one direction is evident over
several survey years, if several similar items trend in the same direction, or if there is corroborating evidence from other sources. Even a relatively large percentage-point difference on an isolated item measured at just two or three points in time seems too flimsy a basis for declaring a trend, and so when I have only two or three data points, the other criteria for judging something a real change—several similar items trending in the same direction and independent corroboration of the shift—take on greater weight.

This book focuses on change, but not everything is changing. In 2014, 91 percent of Americans said that they believe in God or a higher power, 68 percent said that they pray at least several times a week, 79 percent said that they believed in life after death, 42 percent reported trying to convince others to accept Jesus Christ, and 39 percent reported having had a “born again” experience. None of these numbers has changed much since the GSS first asked these questions in the 1980s. Bible reading and believing in heaven and hell also have not changed much in recent decades.\(^6\)

These continuities, and the overall high levels of religious belief and practice in the United States, reinforce the observation that, by world standards, Americans remain remarkably religious in both belief and practice. The trends I describe in the pages that follow should be seen against the backdrop of these continuing high levels of religiosity. This stability should make us reluctant to overstate the amount

\(^6\) Chapter 1
of change in American religion, and it should make us skeptical when we hear that American religion is changing dramatically or suddenly. But this background continuity also makes the changes that are occurring stand out more than they otherwise might.

Time scale also is important when assessing continuity and change. Some religious beliefs and practices that look essentially stable even over a decade or two show signs of change if we take a longer view. The most important of these is general belief in God. Averaging the data between 1988 and 2014, 93 percent of people say they believe in God or a higher power. This percentage changes very little over the twenty-six years it has been measured in the GSS, which is why I mentioned it earlier as an example of continuity. But a longer view shows something different. In the 1950s, 99 percent of Americans said they believed in God, and that number has dropped, slowly but steadily, to stand at 91 percent in 2014. This is a small decline that is stretched out over six decades, and after six decades nearly everyone still says they believe in God or a higher power. The change is so slow that it is difficult to see even over a two-decade span, but combining multiple surveys over a longer period of time shows that the decline is real nonetheless. This example illustrates that my interpretive strategy and my focus on the years since 1972 make me more likely to understate than overstate change. This example also foreshadows a major
summary conclusion: even in the midst of substantial continuity in American religion there are clear signs of decline.\(^7\)

In this book I describe American religious trends under seven headings: diversity, belief, involvement, congregations, leaders, liberal Protestant decline, and polarization. Chapter 2 documents America’s increasing religious diversity, including, significantly, the increasing number of people with no religious affiliation. As we will see, it is not just the country as a whole that is more religiously diverse. Our families and friendship circles also are more religiously diverse than they were several decades ago, and this probably is why increasing religious diversity has been accompanied by a cultural change in the direction of greater toleration, even appreciation, of religions other than our own.

Chapter 3 is about religious belief. Although general belief in God did not decline much over this period, closer inspection shows that fewer people express that belief with great confidence. Believing that the Bible is the literal word of God also has declined. In this chapter I also document the recent growth in what I call a diffuse spirituality, including the rising number of people who say that they are spiritual but not religious, and I show why this increase should not be understood as a counterforce to religious decline.

Chapter 4 focuses on religious involvement, which mainly means attendance at weekend worship services. It is more difficult than one might think to nail down the trend in worship
attendance, not least because Americans systematically overstate how often they attend religious services. But we can see clearly enough to conclude that religious involvement has declined. Data that until recently reasonably could be read as indicating stability in religious involvement now unambiguously signal slow decline. It is not that the data have changed. It is that we have more of it, and we now have accumulated enough data over a long enough period of time to discern the signal of slow decline amid the noise of yearly fluctuations.

Because attending worship services remains the most common form of religious involvement, local congregations—churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples—remain the most central kind of religious organization in American society. In chapter 5, I document seven trends in congregational life: declining size, looser connections between congregations and denominations, more computer technology, more informal worship, older congregants, more acceptance of gay and lesbian members—and, in some groups, of gay and lesbian leaders—and, perhaps most important, more people concentrated in very large churches. Taken together, these trends show that congregations are shaped by the same cultural, social, and economic pressures affecting American life and institutions more generally.

Chapter 6 documents several important trends concerning religious leaders. Religious leadership is a less attractive career choice for young people than it used to be. The
numbers of older clergy and of female clergy are higher than they were several decades ago. And public confidence in religious leaders has declined precipitously. Public confidence in other kinds of leaders has declined as well, but confidence in religious leaders has declined more than confidence in leaders of other institutions. All things considered, religious leaders have lost ground on several fronts in recent decades.

Liberal Protestant denominations are the only major religious group to have experienced significant, sustained decline in recent decades. Chapter 7 is about that decline. This is one of the best-known religious trends of the past several decades, but it often is misunderstood. Contrary to what many believe, this decline has not occurred because droves of people have been leaving more liberal denominations to join more conservative religious groups. Nor does the decline of liberal denominations mean that liberal religious ideas are waning. Indeed, as a set of ideas, religious liberalism steadily has gained ground in the United States, despite the fate of the denominations most closely associated with it.

Chapter 8 describes another important trend involving religion, liberalism, and conservatism. Actively religious Americans are more politically and socially conservative than less religious Americans. Regular churchgoing, moreover, now correlates even more strongly with some types of political and social conservatism than it did several decades ago. Rather than being associated with a particular type of
religion, certain kinds of political and social conservatism have become more tightly linked to religiosity itself. The most and least religiously active people are further apart attitudinally than they were several decades ago, but this trend does not warrant a declaration of culture war—yet.

In this book I describe many specific trends. There are interesting details and nuances and complexities, but an essential summary fact about recent religious trends in the United States can be stated simply: American religiosity has declined in recent decades. Believing in life after death may have increased somewhat, but, as we will see in chapter 3, this upturn is better understood as part of the trend toward diffuse spirituality than as an increase in traditional belief. Not every trend I discuss is a matter of decline. Increasingly informal worship, for example, is a change that is neither here nor there regarding decline. And there may be specific times and places in the United States where religion looks like it is on the rise, but these should be understood as short-lived local weather patterns within a national religious climate that is in some ways holding its own but in more ways is slowly declining.

If religiosity is declining in the United States, why do people sometimes think it is holding steady or even increasing? I will answer this question in the final chapter, where I also will offer several other concluding observations about continuity and change in American religion.