Why religion still matters to many in the U.S.

by Mary Beth McCauley

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(*The Christian Science Monitor*) It could be hard to make your way to pray at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Manhattan on Sunday mornings. There's the distraction of New York City pulling you elsewhere. Then there are the diversions of the St. Bart's community itself: the outdoor cafe, the homeless shelter, the Thomas Merton books in the lobby. There are invitations to programs including mindful eating, Bible study, yoga, and tai chi.

Nevertheless, hundreds do find their way to pray on Sunday mornings at the imposing complex on Park Avenue. They filter into the vast space, gradually replacing the tourists who have been tiptoeing down the side aisles, taking pictures of the Byzantine-style interior. Soon, richly vested clergy, cross bearers, torch holders, and choir members begin making their way up the center aisle in an entrance procession 30-strong.

In the congregation are people of all races, men and women, old and young, singles and couples, families with carefully dressed, well-behaved children in tow.

"I don't think it's just the desire to have prayers answered that brings people to church," said F. M. Stallings Jr., recently retired rector of the church. "People do want to come for a sense of peace."

As seen on Sundays at St. Bart's, people are going to church—and embracing religion—in numbers that defy headlines about the "dechurching of America" and experts who see the country as becoming more secular, like Europe.

True, recent figures from the Pew Research Center show that 35 percent of adults born between 1981 and 1996 identify as "nones," saying they are atheists or agnostics, or have no religious affiliation. And, yes, a host of other studies have, over the years, noted a similar drop in religious attendance in the United States, especially among the young. Many mainstream denominations, too, have been

closing or consolidating churches.

But, in any given week, some four out of ten Americans will make their way to churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples—a number that hasn't fluctuated dramatically in the past half century.

Gallup polls, along with other data, seem to support religion's resilience. More than 81 percent of Americans say they identify with a specific religion or denomination; 78 percent say religion is a very or fairly important part of their lives; 57 percent believe that religion is able to solve today's problems.

Organized religion this summer ranked fourth among 15 American institutions in the degree of public confidence it inspired—ahead of the presidency, the U.S. Supreme Court, and medicine, behind small business, the military, and (perhaps surprisingly) police.

And Gallup reported recently that while attendance may be off, Americans are no less likely now to attend religious services than they were in the 1940s and '50s. This was the period just before the über-religious years of the mid-1950s and early '60s, when Americans, in lockstep, got married, had children, and went to church. The lesson, said Frank Newport, editor in chief at Gallup, whose company has tracked church attendance for 70 years, is that religious worship in the U.S. is cyclical.

Forecasts for the future don't portend a religious resurgence in the U.S., but neither do they predict a faith-free culture. Pew predicts a drop in the number of Americans identifying as Christian, for instance, from three-quarters of the population today to two-thirds in 2050. Many consider that a slim decline over 35 years—especially when society no longer exerts the pressure it once did to believe in God.

Some researchers argue that the U.S. isn't becoming more secular as much as it's becoming more devout—a country with fewer followers but ones who are more serious about their faith.

"There's a greater willingness now to say 'I'm not religious,' " says Christian Smith, director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, and co-principal investigator of the noted National Study of Youth and Religion. As a result, he added, "for people who do continue to practice religion, [their communities] tend to be made up of the seriously committed, not just those

swept along by obligation.”

Meghan Cokeley’s devotion to church today is rooted in a religious experience she had when she was younger. Brought up Roman Catholic, when she was 18 years old she learned about St. Francis of Assisi, who chose a life of poverty over his family’s riches. She began to feel “restless” about her own lifestyle. When visiting the town of Assisi during a senior year high school trip to Italy, she recalled, “At the tomb of St. Francis, I had my first experience of the palpable love of God. I was so deeply moved I wept.”

She came home, switched her career path from chemistry to theology, and 18 years later is director of evangelization at the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Such an “encounter with God” is not rare, she believes, but each “looks different,” some dramatic, some subtle.

A personal religious experience often drives people to worship. “A lot of people claim to have had a moment of access to a divine being,” a feeling that God is holding them or comforting them or similarly is present with them on a personal level, said Christian Miller, who teaches philosophy of religion at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. “It can lead the person to respond by practicing religion.”

People who go to services regularly are more likely to be older, female, and Southern. They have a better education and higher economic status than those who don’t, Newport said. What’s uncertain, he said, is whether higher numbers of younger people will join religious institutions later in life.

Smith observed that religious groups that place high demands on their members are gaining in appeal.

“Everybody tells me to be a nice person,” said Smith, but people want more from their religion than the kind of answers they can get anywhere.

David Teutsch, former president of Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and now head of its Center for Jewish Ethics, said that middle-ground Jewish congregations tend to appeal to seekers through interest in one of three areas at first: spiritual life, social action, or community. The longer members stay with the synagogue, the more they participate in all facets, he said.

“Everyone is battered by a culture of increasing materialism and isolation,” the rabbi said. “There is a lot of meaning-seeking going on in America, and Judaism has a lot to say about that.”

For LaNella Smith, a Methodist from Durham, North Carolina, church is part worship, part song, and part social justice work, through her affiliation with United Methodist Women. She begins each day praying quietly with a devotional text, “a constant reminder that God is with me, no matter what is going on,” she says.

Her keenest sense of God, she says, came the day of her grandmother’s funeral. “I was very, very, very close to her.” That day she went alone, early, to the funeral home. She recalled simply, “I had a conversation with my grandmother. I had a conversation with God.” She sang the hymn “Blessed Assurance” and went home. “I felt so much better in my soul, after that time alone, me believing in that ‘blessed assurance,’ ” she recalled. “God assured me everything was going to be OK.”

While a great hymn provided comfort to Smith, the great traditions of Judaism delight and direct Mitchell Marcus, professor of computer science, linguistics, and artificial intelligence at the University of Pennsylvania. Having been brought up on “Judaism lite,” Marcus saw in college the “tremendous value” faith traditions had for his non-Jewish friends.

“I realized there are a number of these ancient traditions around, and your own seemed like a really good place to start,” he said.

While he worships in a Conservative synagogue, he incorporates many Orthodox Jewish practices into his life. He loves studying sacred texts while awaiting a sabbath visit from his daughter and her family. In his form of voluntary Orthodoxy, he keeps kosher at home and has Friday night meals there or at the homes of his children or his friends.

“Sabbath for me has always been very, very important,” he said. “For me, observance is a spiritual practice rather than a ‘have-to.’ ”

Structure is a tough sell in the free-for-all of American culture, but for some believers it illuminates the journey. Sarah Ali, a young Muslim economist from Washington, D.C., had a “moderate” religious upbringing, one she believes allows her to enjoy her faith all the more as an adult. Because she needed to study much of Islam on her own, she feels she better appreciates her religious traditions.

“I fast for Allah, not for the whole world,” she said. Even as some of her Muslim friends eschew the hijab, Ali wears a headscarf. She tries to say her prayers (five times a day) at home, but sometimes she needs to find a mosque or even a store dressing room for prayer. She prays formally in Arabic, then includes her own petitions.

The scrutiny accorded Muslims after 9/11 is never far from her thoughts. “I have to be very vigilant with how I conduct myself in public,” said Ali, who was born in Texas. “It frustrates me, but it’s part of life.”

The current rise of atheism highlights another enduring clash: that between science and religion. It suggests reason and religion are perpetually in conflict.

But that’s not necessarily the case. Some colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania think Marcus’s Ph.D. students must be avowedly secular. But the professor finds the opposite to be true. His students, regardless of faith, have in fact been religiously curious, often very devout, and eager to talk about their beliefs, he says, and he encourages it.

The many wrongs associated with religion over the millenniums don’t negate its value, he believes. “Being human is hard and is challenging,” he said. “Religion holds up for us an ideal behavior and ideal practices to strive for.”

Samantha Evans, a newly ordained Presbyterian pastor doing a residency at Philadelphia’s Broad Street Ministry, was once a physics major bent on saving the world through biomedical research. After college, she followed a vague hunch and decided to apply to the Princeton Theological Seminary.

“At the end of the day, I think a lot of people are seeking understanding,” she said. Ministering to them requires stepping away from the need for answers and finding “room for ambiguity.”

For Stallings, his time at St. Bart’s caps off a career’s worth of working on Sundays. His ministry took him from San Francisco to Mississippi to Staten Island.

Despite his love for liturgy, he thought he might take a break from Sunday services when he retired. Read the *New York Times*. Linger over coffee. But after hanging up his vestments in May, when he finally had his Sunday mornings to himself, he was surprised to find himself back in church. To Stallings, what happens on Sundays is

simple.

“I don’t think it has to do with correct belief, not with orthodoxy but with people joining together—the sights and sounds of people getting up from their pews and going to communion,” Stallings said. “There’s something so common about that desire to come and receive.”