

More people are praying, but religious ties are fraying: Belief in afterlife has also increased

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The number of Americans who are praying is increasing at the same time that more of them say they have no formal religious affiliation, according to a major polling organization.

The dynamic represents an “apparent shift in patterns of spiritual practice and identity away from the familiar institutions,” Omar M. McRoberts, a University of Chicago sociologist and researcher, said in an interview.

“We are witnessing a decoupling of ‘spirituality’ from ‘religion,’” said Mc Roberts. It is a trend echoed in other surveys and accounts of individuals calling themselves “spiritual but not religious.”

“I think we can expect to see yet more novel versions of religiosity appear, in response to changes in spirituality,” he said. The University of Chicago study, released October 23, was based on numerous surveys, including the General Social Survey’s own study of 52,000 U.S. adults.

“While fewer people identify with a particular religion, belief in God remains high,” said Tom W. Smith, coauthor of the study and director of the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

The “spiritual but unchurched” Americans are a growing force, he indicated, with the new study finding that nearly a quarter, 22 percent, have never attended a religious service. This is an increase from 9 percent in 1972. The study found that 16 percent listed “none” when asked to specify their formal religious affiliation.

However, the study also found that the number of adults practicing daily prayer rose from 52 percent, in a 1989–90 survey, to 59 percent now. Belief in the afterlife also increased, from 69 percent in 1973 to 73 percent.

Comparing religious trends in other regions of the world, researchers found a somewhat surprising “pattern of resilience” in formerly communist-ruled Eastern Europe.

“After decades of repression by antireligionist, authoritarian regimes, in the face of national tragedies, and following serious self-inflicted harm from moral failures by religious leaders, religion has shown the ability to rebound,” Smith said. -*Ecumenical News International*