

Is religious fervor waning in the South? Yes and no.

by [Michael D. Regan](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Signs are beginning to emerge suggesting that role of religion in the Bible Belt may be declining, at least to some degree.

The shift is increasingly apparent in local cafes and restaurants in towns across the South, particularly on Sundays. The sale of alcohol on Sundays has long been prohibited in many traditionally religious conservative communities. But recently, more and more of those communities are repealing so-called Blue Laws.

In Sylacauga, Alabama, a small town of just 12,700 people that hosts 78 churches, after-church lunch-goers are now bumping into craft beer drinking sports fans at local restaurants, following a September vote to do away with the Sunday exclusion. Similar initiatives are also underway in parts of Georgia and Mississippi.

A Pew Research Center survey showed 19 percent of Southerners do not identify with any organized religion, a 6 percent rise since 2007 and a number that more closely matches that of the rest of the country.

In another Pew study, 35 percent of Millennials surveyed self-identified as atheist or agnostic. The tendencies appear to be consistent across races.

"We've seen this sort of broader shift throughout the country as a whole with fewer people identifying as being part of the religious base," Jessica Martinez, a senior researcher in religion and public life at Pew told the Associated Press. "In the South you see a pattern very similar to what we are seeing in other regions."

However, the role of religion in the South, and the rest of the United States, is more nuanced than any one statistic can demonstrate.

Other surveys suggest it may be too early to tell whether the South, or the country as a whole, is actually losing religious fervor.

Martinez said the region known for being a conservative bastion still hangs on to other long-held views, including attitudes toward same-sex marriage.

The survey also found that church affiliations are still strong in the Bible Belt, where 76 percent of those polled called themselves Christians and religion still remains a popular part of political platforms.

Data collected by Gallup indicated 81 percent of Americans identify with a specific religion and 57 percent of those believed religion could solve present-day problems.

Thomas Fuller, a religion professor at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, said the reasons vary as to why Southern churches appear to be losing some of their cultural significance, including new migration and the Internet. But that doesn't mean religion is stifled.

"The South is not nearly as homogeneous, it is far more diverse culturally now than it's ever been," he said. "In a way you're a little hard-pressed now to talk about Southern culture in a singular fashion. It's not nearly as one-dimensional anymore or easy to describe."

*This report contains material from the Associated Press.*