

Is religious intensity in the U.S. declining? Sociologists disagree

At the heart of the debate is a question: Is American religion exceptional?

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [December 19, 2018](#) issue

The United States is more religious than Europe, almost everyone agrees.

Two-thirds of U.S. Christians pray daily, compared with a median figure of just 18 percent of Christians across 15 countries in Europe, to cite one recent survey.

But sociologists disagree about whether the intense religious devotion that has long characterized a segment of the United States is impervious to the trends in Europe, where all the markers of faith have dramatically slipped over the past few decades.

In contrasting articles in the journal *Sociological Science*, two groups of scholars have sized up decades' worth of survey data generated by the massive General Social Survey—and arrived at different conclusions.

At the heart of the debate in the sociology of religion is a question: Is American religion exceptional?

Exceptionalism is the deep-seated conviction that the U.S. marches to a different drummer. While some argue this distinctiveness is proof it has been blessed by God, most scholars who use the term mean that the United States is simply different.

In [an article published in *Sociological Science* in November](#), David Voas and Mark Chaves of University College London and Duke University, respectively, maintain that U.S. religious devotion may be higher than in other Western countries but it too is slowly declining and is essentially no different from other developed nations in its growing secularization.

On the other side are two graduate students, Sean Bock at Harvard University and Landon Schnabel at Indiana University, who argued in an article published a year ago that the most devout Americans have remained so and that the decline is

coming from those with moderate religious habits.

“There’s a short uptick during Reagan’s presidency, but other than that, it’s been steady from the 1970s to today,” said Schnabel, a Ph.D. candidate in Bloomington, Indiana.

Voas and Chaves counter that even the intensely religious segment of the U.S. population is shrinking. Just as Europe has become more secular, so has the United States, just at a slower rate.

“The fact of the matter is, even on the intense religious category the U.S. is declining, if very slowly,” said Chaves, a professor of sociology and religious studies at Duke.

Schnabel and Bock had examined five indicators of intense religion: strong religious affiliation, more than weekly attendance at religious services, biblical literalism, affiliation with an evangelical religious group, and praying multiple times per day. They looked at data from the General Social Survey from 1989 to 2016.

Going back further, there’s been a significant change in three of those areas—affiliation, the number of religious services people attend each week, and belief that the Bible is the literal word of God—between 1973 and today, Voas and Chaves argue.

In the first area, they chart a decline from 38.1 percent reporting strong affiliation with a religious group in 1974 to 1980, to 36.2 percent through 2016. Those responding that they attended religious services more than once a week decreased from 8 percent in 1973 to 6.6 percent in the 2010s.

Asked if “the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” 31 percent said yes between 2010 and 2016, down from 35 percent between 1984 and 1990.

The reason for the overall drop? It’s generational, Voas and Chaves argue.

“Each successive birth cohort is less intensely religious than the one before,” they wrote, “and there is little sign of people becoming more intensely religious with age or over time.” —Religion News Service

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