

## **Who Leaves, Who Stays, Who Returns: Wheatley Institute Report Examines Religious Deconversion and Reconversion**

*Young people more likely to leave the faith, but marriage and parenthood drive some to return*

PROVO, Utah, Nov. 19, 2024 — Eighty-four percent of the world's population affiliates with a faith of some sort, but there is evidence that more people in the United States and elsewhere are leaving religion. A new report from the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University examines this phenomenon, analyzing current statistics and trends, potential factors influencing decisions to leave or return to faith, and resultant consequences of those choices on individuals and society.

“While predictions of the death of religion have been discussed for centuries, the world is actually becoming more religious in concentrated areas where birth rates are higher,” said Paul Lambert, religion initiative director at the Wheatley Institute and a co-author of the report. “However, in America and other developing countries, more people are turning away from religion, a phenomenon we wanted to explore, particularly because there can be some significant negative consequences to disaffiliation.”

Just three decades ago religiously unaffiliated adults in the US (“nones”) accounted for roughly five percent of the population. Today they make up about 30% percent. The report, “The Tides of Religion,” looked at several personal characteristics, including age, gender and political affiliation to determine which are associated with being less religious or leaving faith. Key findings by characteristic include:

**Age:** The trend toward irreligion often begins before legal adulthood. While young people may leave faith abruptly once they leave home, for many individuals the process starts long before and continues to operate throughout their adolescence.

**Upbringing:** While there is some evidence that more people today are being raised without religion compared to prior generations, the ranks of the irreligious still largely come from people who deconverted from faith, and the percentage of those converting to religion after being raised without one has remained relatively consistent over the past 20 years. However, the majority of Americans—around 7 in 10—were raised with a religion and still identify with one.

**Gender:** Women are more likely than men to be religious, but since 2020 this gap has narrowed.

**Political affiliation:** Republicans are generally more religious than Democrats, and research suggests that identifying as a Republican makes one less likely to leave their faith. Numerous studies also show that secularization in the United States has primarily happened among Democrats and Independents, and that Democrats have moved away from religion at a faster pace than Republicans.

**Education:** A common argument in secularization theory is that education leads people to become less religious. However, the research that tracks people across time, without focusing

solely on geography-level religiosity and education, suggests that people who go through college are less likely to leave faith than their counterparts who do not attend college.

**Family relationships:** Those who grow up in less-religious families are more likely to leave religion and those who have poor family relationships are more likely to deconvert. Relatedly, parents who employ either authoritarian, high-pressure parenting or permissive, low-pressure parenting both tend to have more children who leave their family faith than parents who use a balance of warmth and structure.

Research suggests that 1 in 5 individuals who leave religion in early adulthood eventually reconvert. Family relationships play a pivotal role in this process; strong, loving relationships with parents can foster reconversion, and having children often strengthens this effect, particularly when children reach school age. People who had personal spiritual experiences and renewed connections with God are also among those who reconvert.

While leaving faith can be a positive for some people, studies show that there can be a negative impact to disaffiliation. Poor mental health, lower rates of charitable giving and declining birth and marriage rates have all been linked to religious disaffiliation. This could have far-reaching consequences for individual health and longevity, family relationships, community cohesion and demographic stability.

“Our research has shown that those who disaffiliate from a religion experienced poorer health and well-being, which may result from reduced church participation, which provides a healthy social gathering for many people,” said Lambert. “While religion still faces significant headwinds, it is fair to say that, with 1 in 5 people returning to the faith they grew up in, religion is not the relic of a bygone era, and has proven beneficial to good health and well being.”

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