# The Wheatley Institute Survey of Lived Religion

A FOUR-PART SERIES

REPORT 1

# State of Religion and Spirituality in America

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Wheatley Institute
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WHEATLEY INSTITUTE SURVEY OF LIVED RELIGION:

# Executive Summary

For the better part of a decade, the story of American religion has been told as a story of subtraction. Affiliation is down. Attendance is down. In 2024, eight in ten Americans said religion was losing influence in American life, and serious scholarship has documented the retreat of traditional religious authority. That perception has since softened—by 2026 the proportion seeing religion's influence as diminished has fallen to six in ten—but the subtraction story persists as a frame through which American religion is read.[1]

But affiliation and attendance measure institutions. They tell us where Americans belong. They tell us little about what Americans believe, what they practice when no one is watching, what they draw on under stress, what they pass to their children, or what they expect after death.

The Wheatley Institute Survey of Lived Religion (WSLR), a nationally representative survey of 2,005 American adults, was built to ask that wider set of questions. This is the first of four reports drawing on it.

**REPORT 1: State of Religion and Spirituality in America**
This report establishes the baseline: what Americans believe, how they practice, which identities they rank as most essential to who they are, and what they hope for at the end of life.

**REPORT 2: Religion and Personal Well-Being**
This report turns to the individual, asking whether religious practice tracks with happiness, family life, and the capacity to cope with stress—and what we observe among those with no practice to draw on.

**REPORT 3: Religion and Civil Society**
This report considers what religious communities contribute beyond their own walls, including participation in civic organizations that have nothing to do with faith.

**REPORT 4: Faith Transmission and the Next Generation**
This report asks how belief passes between generations, and what fills the vacuum when parents step back from faith.

Across the series we ask whether religious beliefs and practices predict favorable outcomes for individuals and for society. The cumulative claim is that religion in America is more alive, more beneficial, and more civically consequential than the coverage of its decline suggests—and that America is more faithful than the numbers we usually cite would imply.

REPORT 1

# State of Religion and Spirituality in America

This first report establishes the baseline for the state of religion and spirituality in America today. Before we can ask whether religion makes people happier, whether it strengthens communities, or whether it survives the passage between generations, we need an accurate picture of what American religious life actually consists of. That picture is organized around questions the standard surveys do not ask:

- What do Americans believe about God—and about themselves in relation to God?
- How many read scripture or pray daily, and how many of those are religious "nones"?
- How many have witnessed a miracle or changed a decision based on a spiritual impression?
- Why do people attend the congregation they do, and how many showed up last Easter?
- What do Americans think happens when they die, and who do they want at the graveside?
- Which identities do they rank as most essential—e.g., parent, Buddhist, child of God, or Democrat?

To begin, three findings set the stage:

- Three-quarters of Americans place at least some importance on religion.
- Forty-three percent thank God multiple times a day; indeed, Americans are more likely to direct gratitude to God with this frequency than to human beings in their lives.
- And only about a quarter of the unaffiliated believe that death is simply the end.

## Measuring the Religion Americans Live

Ask most Americans whether they are religious and you'll get a one-word answer. Ask what they believe, how often they sense God in their daily lives, what they hope happens when they die, or why they show up to the congregation they do, and you'll get something far richer and more surprising. For all the divinity Americans report in their everyday lives, surveys have long reduced it to a handful of blunt measures: Do you attend services? How religious do you consider yourself?

An individual's relationship with the divine is not defined by which attendance box they check. It runs through their thoughts, their feelings, their habits, and their sense of meaning—the silent prayer of gratitude, the unexpected sense of being spoken to, the symbols displayed in the home, the hope about what comes after death. The Wheatley Institute Survey of Lived Religion (WSLR) was designed to capture exactly this: a multi-dimensional portrait of how Americans live their faith.

Scholarship on religion has argued about where to look for that portrait since its founding. William James proposed that religion, for purposes of study, be understood as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[2] Émile Durkheim, writing at nearly the same moment, insisted on close to the reverse: that religion is irreducibly social, a unified system of beliefs and practices that binds a community together, and that beliefs alone do not constitute it.[3] The century-long debate that followed has made one point difficult to deny: religion is sustained in both solitude and assembly, and each strengthens the other. Yet our standard measures capture only a narrow slice of communal religion and almost none of the interior life that sustains it. To understand the state of spirituality in America, we must examine both congregation and conscience. This report is an effort to do exactly that.

## Scope and Methodological Approach

To capture the full texture of Americans' religious and spiritual lives, we conducted a Qualtrics survey of 2,005 adults spanning the major traditions—Protestants; Catholics; a range of religious minorities, including Latter-day Saints, Jews, and Muslims; general Christians (respondents who identified as Christian but not as Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox Christians, or Latter-day Saint); and the religiously unaffiliated (those who do not identify with any religion). In some charts, for purposes of grouping larger categories, the term "Other Christian" is also used, which includes the general Christians above, Orthodox Christians, and Latter-day Saints. The survey is nationally representative and self-weighted, with careful quality controls throughout.

Because much of what we asked has never appeared on a national survey before, we also folded in a handful of time-tested questions—about belief in God, religious attendance, and self-rated religiosity—to serve as benchmarks. On most of these, our results track the major legacy surveys closely. Where they diverge, they do so in a telling direction: our sample looks modestly more religious. Most notably, "nones" make up 18% of our respondents, compared with 25% in the General Social Survey and 29% in the Pew Religious Landscape Study—and somewhat fewer of our respondents describe themselves as "not religious at all." We read that gap cautiously. It could be an early trace of something real, a population that is more religious than the legacy instruments capture, or it could be the normal variability that is expected when surveys differ in how they sample, word their questions, and reach people. The broad alignment with established surveys gives us confidence in data drawn from the newer questions that form the heart of this report, while the differences are themselves worth keeping in view. (Readers who want the full set of comparisons and methodological details will find them in the appendix.)

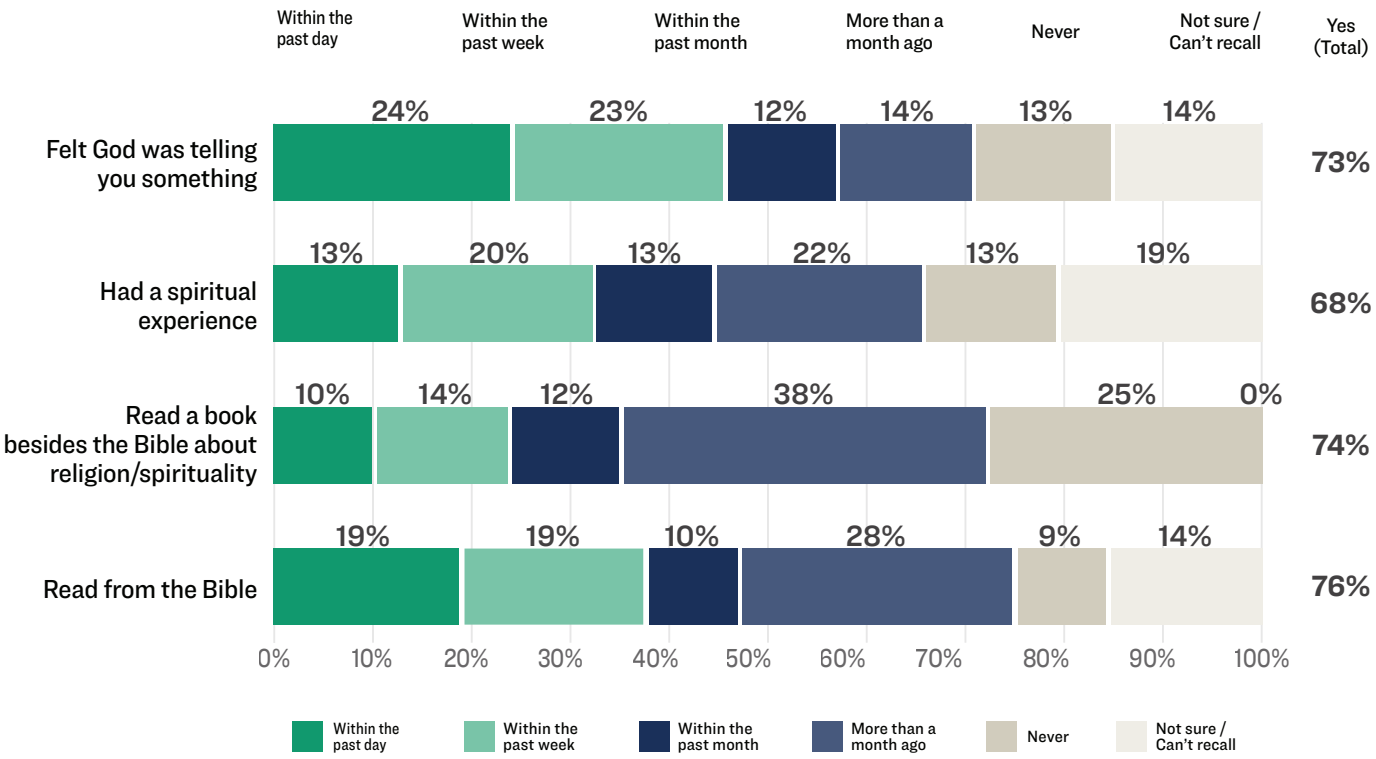
The survey addresses several themes:

- ***Internal spiritual lives.*** How is the spiritual folded into Americans' day-to-day lives outside of religious services?
- ***Personal spiritual beliefs.*** What do religious Americans and religious "nones" believe about the spiritual realm?
- ***Rituals and community worship.*** This is the organized part of American religious life, diving underneath the surface of religious participation.
- ***Religious identity and the ordering of the self.*** How important is religious identity to Americans compared with the family, national, racial, and political identities?
- ***Big-picture afterlife beliefs and funerals.*** Beyond heaven and hell, what exactly do Americans believe about the afterlife?

## Personal Religiosity and Interior Faith

While organized religion remains an important part of American life, it captures only one dimension of the nation's religious experience. Much recent attention has focused on the decline in religious affiliation (though that decline has recently stabilized),[4] but it would be a mistake to read disaffiliation as evidence that Americans have abandoned faith or spiritual experience. The interior life of religion remains vibrant: 46% of Americans reported having a spiritual experience within the past month, 59% said they felt God was telling them something during that time, and roughly three-quarters have read a book about religion, faith, or spirituality at some point in their lives. Nor are these experiences confined to formal religious services. About a quarter of Americans reported sensing God's communication within the past day, and about half within the past week. For millions of Americans, God is not a distant theological proposition but an active presence in their everyday experience. If congregations reveal the communal face of religion, these experiences reveal its interior life.

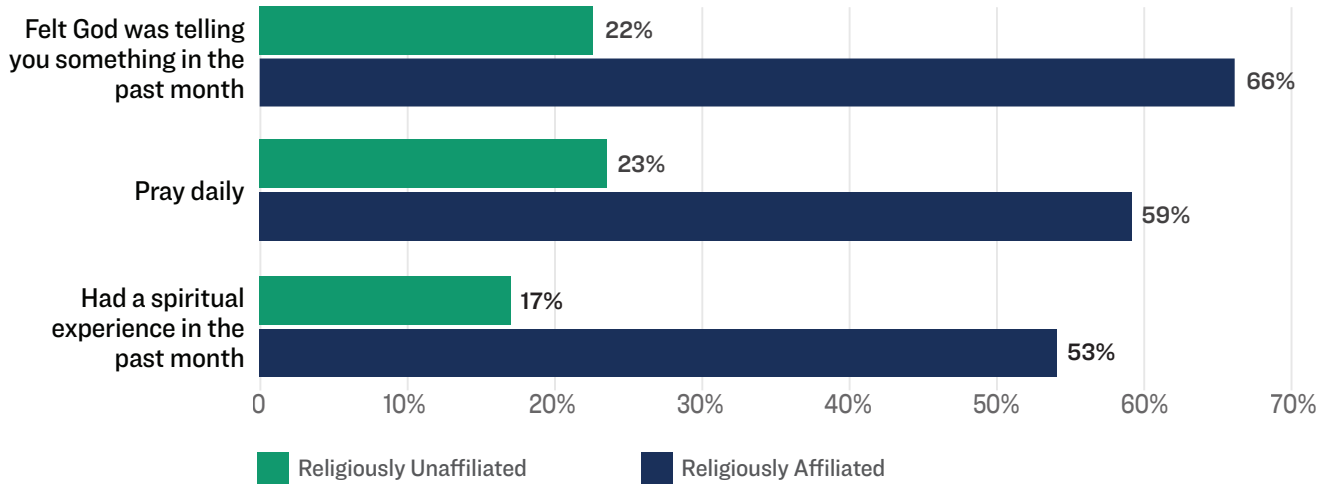
### Frequency of Spiritual Experiences Among Americans




It is worth noting that even Americans who identify with no religion still engage in these spiritual practices, albeit at lower rates than the religiously affiliated. About a quarter of religious "nones" pray daily, 17% report having a spiritual experience within the past month, and 22% say they felt God was telling them something during that time. This comports with findings from other nationally representative third-party surveys that most people who do not affiliate with a faith still believe in a God or higher power, with only about one in three rejecting the existence of any higher power.[5]

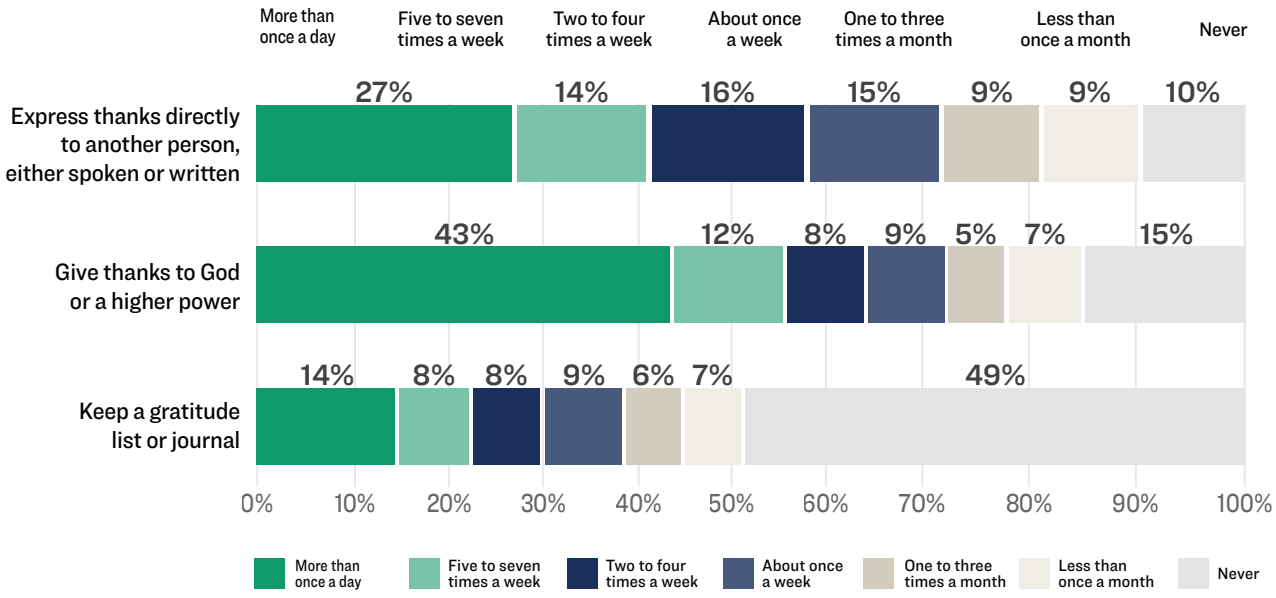
## Spirituality and Religious Affiliation

Percentage of Americans



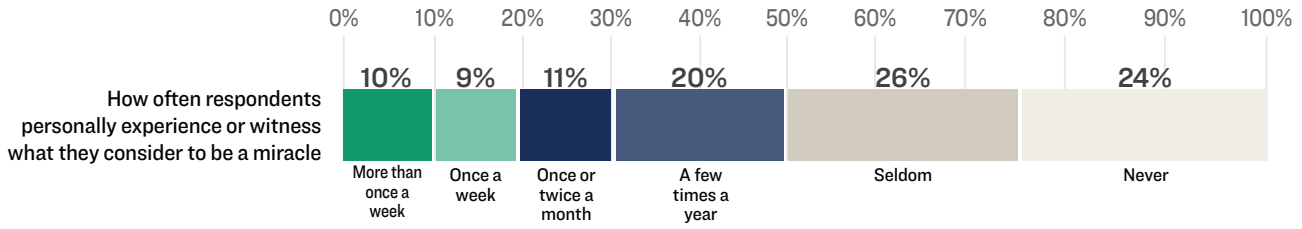

Americans do not just believe that God speaks to them—they speak back. Seventy-seven percent thank God at least once a month, and four in ten do so multiple times each day, a higher share than those who regularly express gratitude to another person. For many Americans, it would not be an exaggeration to posit that God is their primary outlet for gratitude. In a country routinely described as secularizing, the most common recipient of American gratitude remains the divine.

## Frequency of Giving Thanks to God and Others




The religious and spiritual lives of Americans are clearly not reducible to whether they attend services once a week or not; there is an internal spiritual dimension that can be easily missed. A large majority of Americans (76%) say they have experienced or witnessed a miracle, and about half experience one a few times a year or more.

### Percentage of Americans Who Have Experienced or Witnessed a Miracle




Sacred texts and symbols remain part of everyday life: six in ten Americans read from the Bible at some point within the past year with about four in ten Americans indicating they read from the Bible within the past week. Only about a quarter read from a book besides the Bible about religion or spirituality over the same period. Most Americans reported displaying some religious symbols in their home.

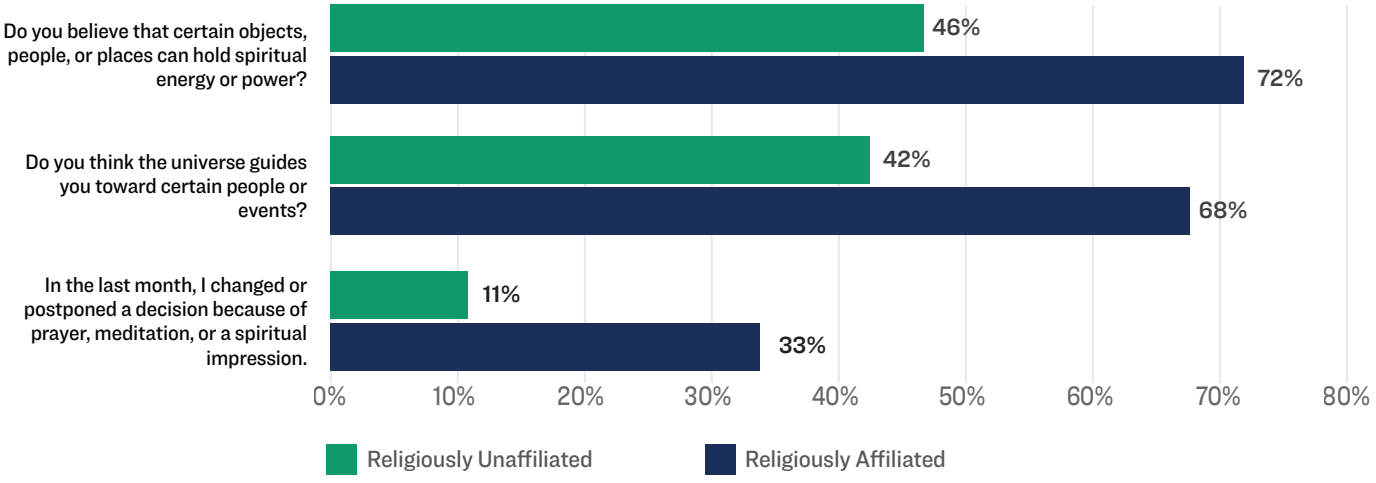
Overall, these findings reveal an interior religious life that is robust, active, and largely invisible to the instruments we normally use. Americans are praying, thanking, reading, and listening—often daily, and often alone. Of course, these religious practices are rooted in beliefs about the nature of reality, the existence of the divine, and humanity's place in the world. We turn next to those beliefs.

## Religion, Belief, and the Supernatural

These personal spiritual and religious experiences are often rooted in belief. While belief in God is commonly measured in representative surveys, the WSLR sought to probe a broader range of spiritual beliefs. Belief itself remains nearly universal: about nine in ten Americans believe in God or a higher power, and roughly eight in ten say there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it.[6] Americans also fold that belief into who they are: 70% say that being a divine creation is an important part of their identity, and 71% say the same of being a child of God. Against that backdrop, the WSLR shows how broadly those beliefs spill past the boundaries of organized religion. About half (46%) of religious "nones" still believe that objects, people, or places can hold spiritual energy or power, while about four in ten believe that the universe guides them "toward certain people or events." But spiritual beliefs do not always translate into action. Only about one-third of religious Americans and one in ten religiously unaffiliated Americans reported changing a decision in the last month based on "prayer, meditation, or a spiritual impression," suggesting that while many Americans believe God communicates with them, they are more selective about acting on those impressions.

### Spiritual Belief Beyond Formal Religious Affiliation

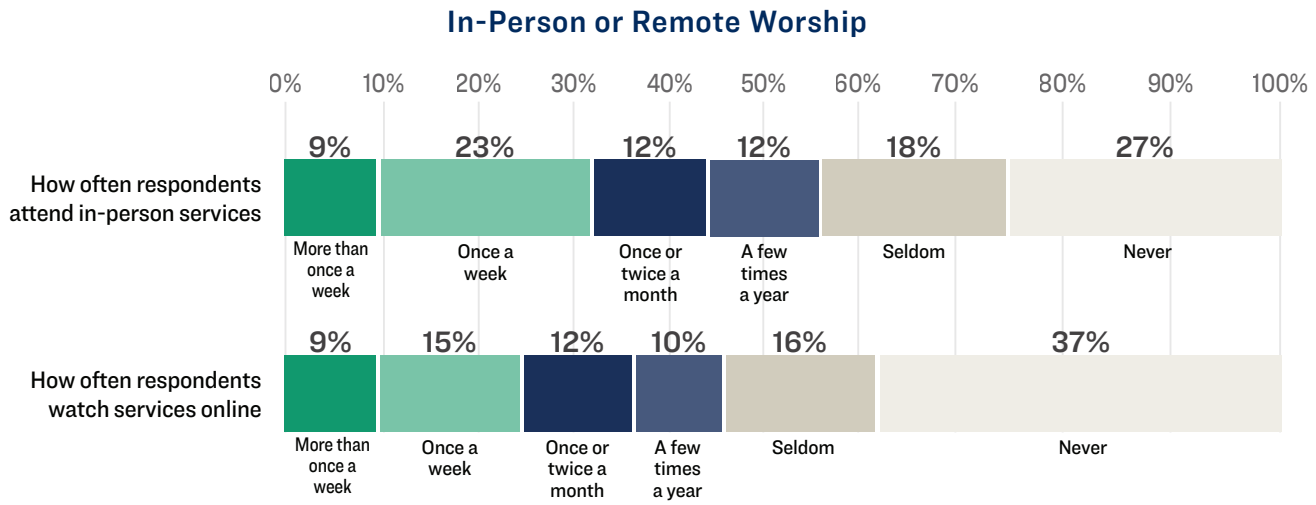
Percentage answering Yes to questions about spiritual energy, guidance, and religious or spiritual impressions



Belief, then, is neither confined to religious affiliation nor reducible to doctrine. But private belief is only one dimension of religious life. Americans also gather, worship, and participate in shared practices. They attend services. They baptize. They observe holy days—or choose not to. We turn next from what Americans believe to the faith they practice.

## Religion, Ritual, and Communal Worship

The COVID-19 pandemic was a grand experiment in remote work, play, and worship. Could Americans use new digital tools to recreate at home the experiences they had long sought in person? Several years later, it appears that online and television worship has now secured a place in the American religious landscape. The WSLR asked separately about the frequency of in-person worship and the frequency of online or television worship. Most Americans have at least some experience with a digital service, and a sizable share now routinely watch services online or on television.

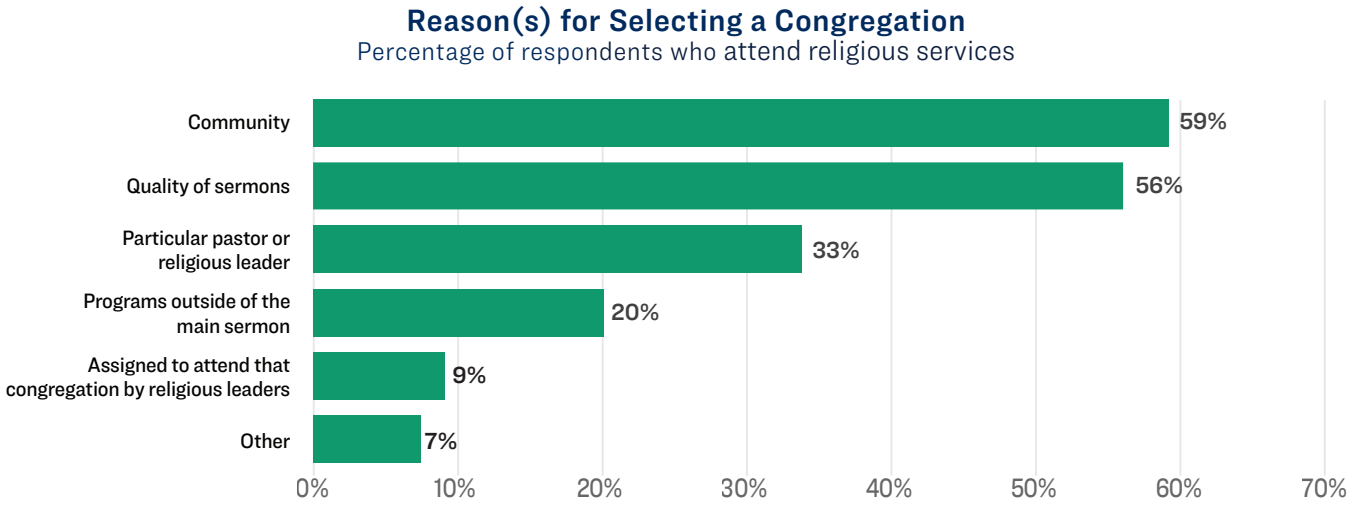



Yet religion largely remains an in-person experience. Americans continue to value gathering face-to-face with a religious community, even when digital worship offers a more convenient alternative.

The WSLR helps explain why. When asked why they attend religious services, about six in ten religious service-attenders cite "the community," making it the single most common reason for attendance. The quality of sermons ranked a close second.

Thus, in an era when people can virtually stream any sermon, life advice, or religious lecture whenever or wherever they want, Americans continue to attend religious services for something no YouTube stream can provide: community.

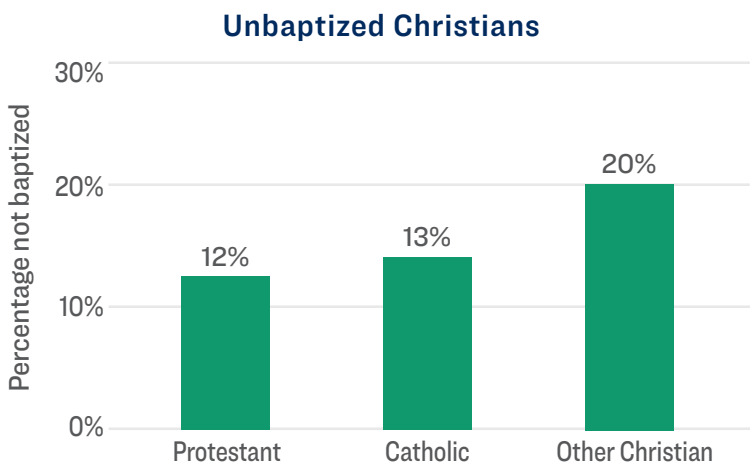
Still, religion is not simply a social club. Religious communities endure because they do more than bring people together; they ask people to make commitments. This is the communal side of religion that Émile Durkheim emphasized: beliefs matter, but so do shared practices.[7] Scholars have long observed that demanding religious rituals and expectations can signal genuine commitment, making it easier for adherents to trust one another and build lasting communities.[8] As economist Laurence Iannaccone famously observed, strict churches often prove to be strong churches.[9]




Baptism stands squarely in this tradition. For Christians, baptism is the foundational ritual: a symbolic death and rebirth that publicly marks a person as a disciple of Christ. The WSLR finds that the vast majority of self-identified Christians have been baptized. Christianity, then, is not simply an identity inherited in a historically Christian-majority nation; it is a faith entered through ritual and sustained through practice.

Yet the WSLR data also reveal that the share of self-identified Christians who have never been baptized varies by tradition, ranging from roughly one in eight adults to one in five. For many Christian traditions, baptism is the ordinary entrance into the Christian life. These findings therefore highlight an important area of attention for pastors, priests, and other Christian leaders.

A similar pattern emerges when considering other religious traditions, although the WSLR cannot provide equally reliable estimates for religious groups with relatively small sample sizes. For comparison, however, a previous Jewish-specific survey suggests that about half of Jewish adults who were raised Jewish or had a Jewish parent have had a bar or bat mitzvah, including roughly a quarter of ethnic, non-religious Jews.[10]




The WSLR finds that about half of Christians did not attend church on Easter, traditionally one of the most important days in the Christian calendar. The survey did not ask about Christmas attendance because Christmas does not always fall on a Sunday, and the timing of Christmas services varies across denominations and congregations, making the question more difficult to measure consistently.

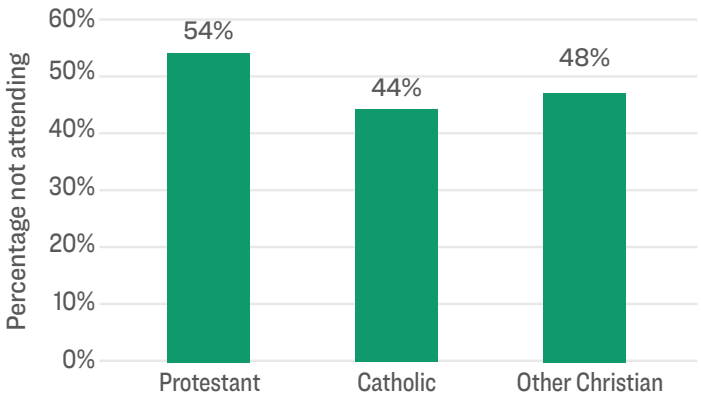
So while Easter is plausibly the most consistently attended day of the year, large swaths of Christendom do not attend church even on this central holy day. Moreover, only about half (47%) of those Christians who attend "a few times a year" attend on Easter, suggesting that infrequent attenders often attend religious services for reasons other than a sense of obligation to observe a particular holy day. Even among weekly Christian attenders, 14% did not attend Easter services.

In contrast, in separate national surveys, only about four in ten American Jews did not attend a Seder the previous Passover,[11] and only about one in five Muslims do not fast during Ramadan.[12] Compared to these religious minorities, Christians appear less likely to observe their major holy days.

While Americans' practices may be uneven, their sense of who they are is not. We turn now from religious rituals of Americans to how they think about their identity.

**Christian Non-Attendance at Easter Services**

Percent of Christians saying they did not attend church services last Easter



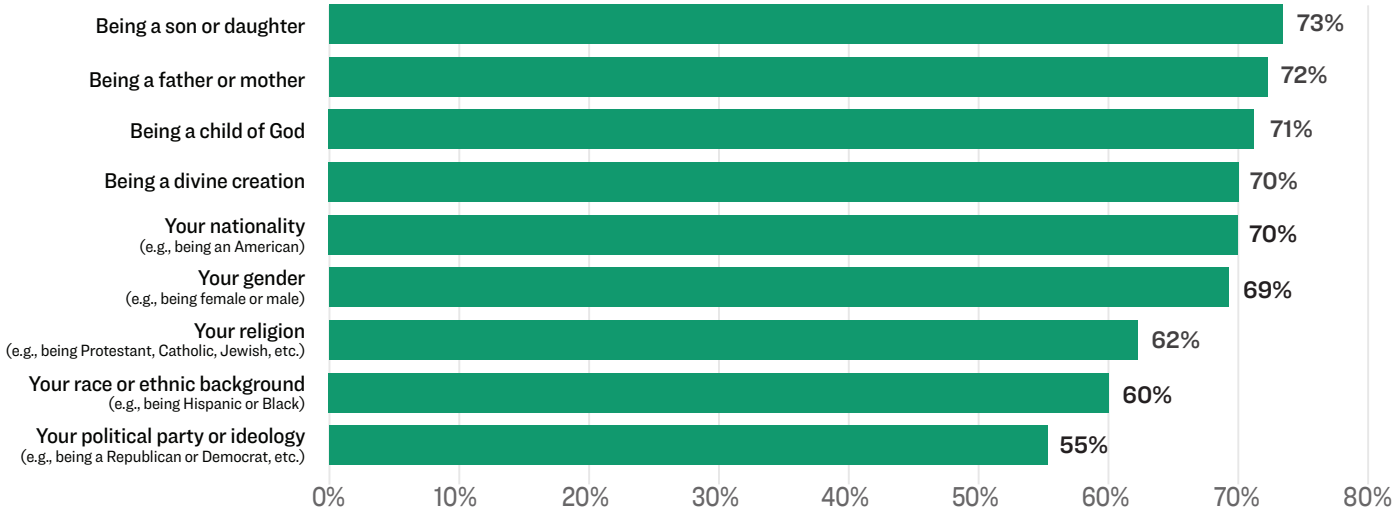

## Religion, Identity, and the Ordering of the Self

From the news, you could easily conclude that Americans are defined primarily by their political and social identities: MAGA or anti-Trump, Democrat or Republican, pro-gun Republican or Mamdani-supporting New Yorker. However, we find that Americans themselves largely don't view their identities this way. These partisan categories aren't nearly as important to people as their family and spiritual identities.

While many surveys ask respondents to rate the importance of religion in their lives, the WSLR asked respondents to self-report the importance of various identities, providing a point of comparison for understanding religious identity. Family and spiritual identities, whether it's identifying as a child of God or a parent to children, are the most important, while political identities are the least. Religious identity is lower on the list—ranking around the same level as ethnic or racial identities—suggesting that most Americans see their relationship to God as more important to their self-conceptualization than their membership in a particular religious group, political party, or race.

**Importance of Personal Identities**

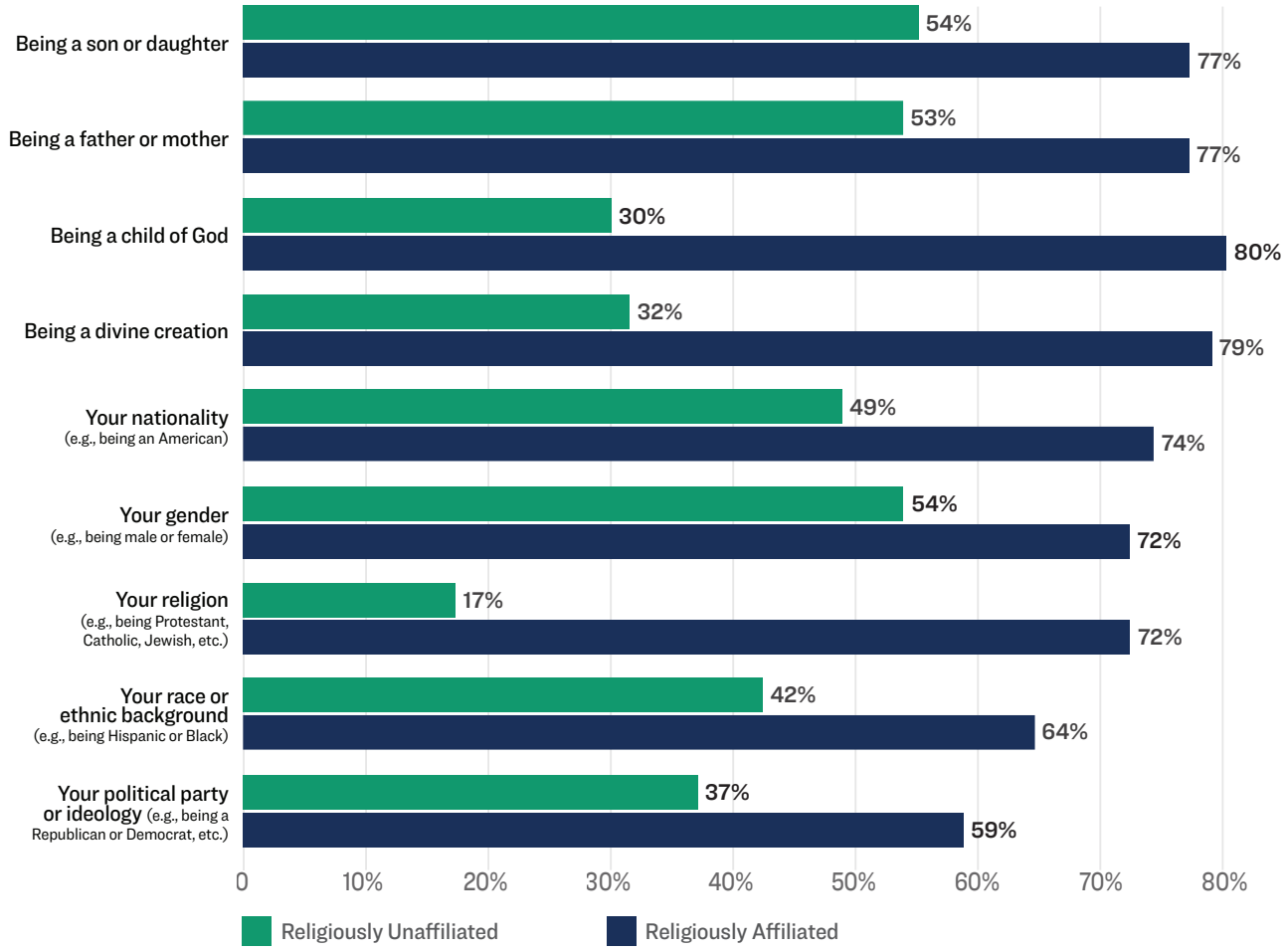
Percent of Americans saying each is moderately, very, or extremely important



For the religiously unaffiliated, the picture is somewhat different. Family and gender are the most salient identities, followed by nationality and race; political affiliation ranks lower, while explicitly religious and divine identities fall near the bottom. In other words, "nones" do not simply replace religion with one dominant alternative identity. Their sense of self appears more dispersed across family, social, civic, and personal categories, with no single sacred role anchoring identity as strongly as it does for many religious Americans.

**Identity Importance and Religious Affiliation**

Percent saying each is moderately, very, or extremely important




This is a striking result at the end of a decade of intense political division. Asked to rank the importance of different aspects of their identity, Americans put "child of God" and "parent" near the top and their political party near the bottom. Yet many of the institutions and conversations that structure American public life—elections, civic participation, community debate, news coverage, and political commentary—treat partisanship as the master identity. The identity Americans rank last is often the one public narratives place first.

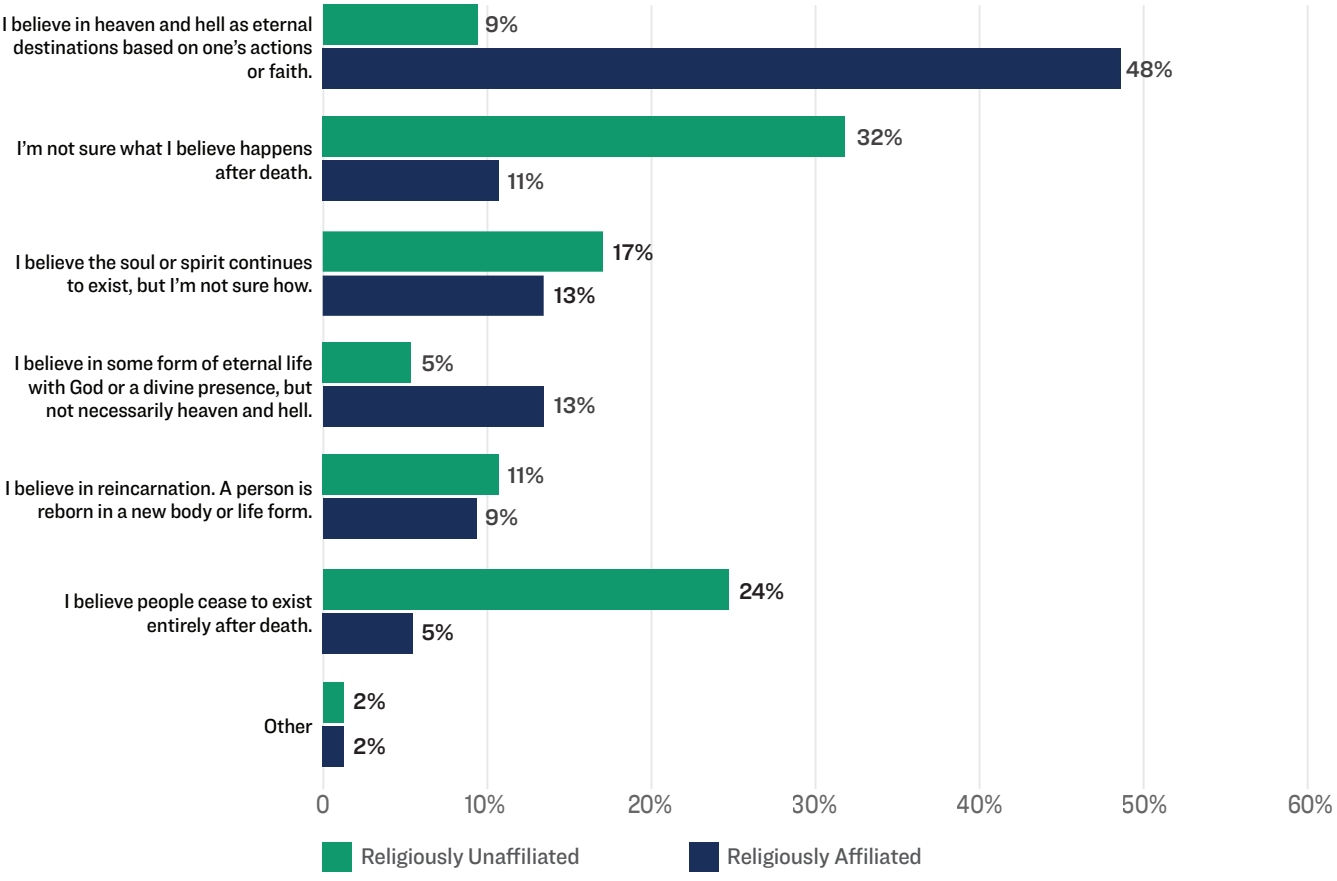
## Religion, Death, and the Afterlife

The question of what happens after we die is among humanity's oldest and most enduring. Every religious tradition offers an answer, and nearly every person must eventually confront the question. While a variety of high-quality surveys have explored beliefs about the afterlife, the WSLR included a broader set of response options to capture the full range of beliefs, including those that do not fit neatly within traditional religious categories.

As one would expect, religious affiliation is associated with markedly different expectations about life after death. About half of religiously affiliated Americans believe in heaven and hell, while the remainder are divided between uncertainty and more vague beliefs about the afterlife. Among religious "nones," about half either believe that death is the end or are unsure of what comes next, while the remainder hold beliefs across a variety of supernatural possibilities. Overall, Americans hold remarkably diverse beliefs about the afterlife; roughly one in ten, for example, believe reincarnation best describes what happens after death.

One pattern that runs through this report also applies to beliefs about death: leaving organized religion is not the same as abandoning belief in the supernatural. Only about one-quarter of religious "nones" say death is simply the end. Three-quarters leave open the possibility that something lies beyond this life, whether heaven, reunion with the divine, reincarnation, another form of existence, or simply an unknown reality they cannot yet describe. On one of the most important existential questions—what happens after death—most Americans, affiliated or not, decline to answer with a flat "nothing."

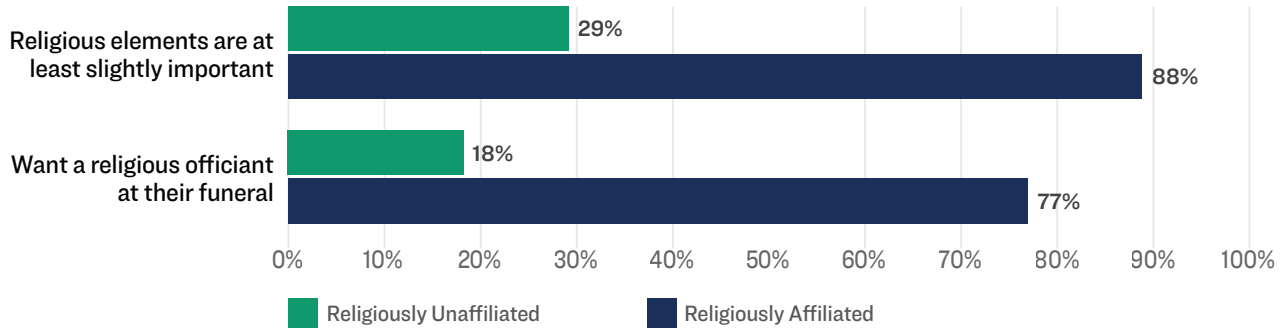
**Afterlife Beliefs and Religious Affiliation**
Percentage of Americans



Those beliefs about what may follow death are also reflected in Americans' preference for their own funerals. As ceremonies marking the passage from life to death, funerals have long been among religion's most meaningful events. Indeed, burial scenes provide some of the first evidence of ritualistic behavior in early hominids.[13] The WSLR suggests that this connection remains remarkably resilient. About one-third of religiously unaffiliated Americans say that religious elements at their funeral are at least slightly important, and about one in five would like a religious officiant. Among the religiously affiliated—including many who seldom attend services—large majorities want clergy to officiate their funeral and want religious symbols or rituals to be part of the service. Even Americans who have stepped away from organized religion often turn back to it when considering life's final passage.

**Funeral Preferences and Religious Affiliation**

Percentage of Americans




Death is where the gap between religious affiliation and religious instinct becomes most visible. Americans who rarely enter a church during ordinary life often still want clergy at their graveside. Whatever else has loosened in American religious life, the connection between life's ultimate questions and religious ritual remains remarkably strong.

# Conclusions:

## What Standard Measures of Religion Miss

American religion is changing, not disappearing. The doom-and-gloom headlines capture something real about declining affiliation, but they miss the deeper story: Americans still live in a spiritually charged world. They pray, give thanks, sense God's presence, mark life with ritual, and face death with hope. Even many who claim no religion have not become flatly secular; they remain open to belief in God, spiritual experiences, sacred meaning, and life beyond this one. Three conclusions follow from the WSLR, and each of them matters well beyond the study of religion.

**First, belief is not the residue of a former time of strong religiosity.** It is tempting to read findings about private prayer, gratitude, miracles, and hope in the afterlife as the fading afterglow of institutions that no longer hold influence. The distribution of the data argues otherwise. These are in fact majority behaviors, reported daily and weekly, across traditions and by a substantial share of people in no tradition at all. A country in which three-quarters of adults say they have experienced or witnessed a miracle and 77% thank God at least monthly is not a post-religious society that has forgotten to revise its paperwork. Belief is alive in American life.

**Second, the boundary between "religious" and "none" is far more porous than our categories imply.** The unaffiliated are not a secular bloc. Most believe in God or a higher power. Roughly half think people, places, or objects can hold spiritual power. Four in ten believe the universe can guide a person. Only about a quarter think death is simply the end, and a larger share say they are unsure what happens after death. "None" is an answer about institutional belonging that has been widely misread as an answer about metaphysics. Any analysis—journalistic, academic, or governmental—that categorically treats the growth of the "nones" as the growth of secularism has already made a substantial error.

**Third, and following from both: America is more religious than the numbers we usually cite.** Affiliation figures have never considered or measured much of what Americans mean by faith. Our instruments were designed for a country where religion lived primarily in congregations. But it also lives in the car, at the bedside, in a text message, in a private decision changed by a spiritual impression, in the religious symbol on the wall, and at the funeral of someone who rarely set foot in a church. While participation in organized religion most often is associated with the greatest benefits in measurements of human flourishing, it is important to recognize the many ways in which individual religiosity and spirituality play out in personal and natural ways.

This report is not an argument that Americans should adhere to one belief system over another. Rather, it attempts to understand the country as it is. And America, as these data show, is religious in ways our conventional measures often fail to capture. That religious life is remarkably diverse. It includes Protestants, Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jews, and Muslims—and it also includes many Americans whose spiritual lives unfold largely outside any formal institution. These findings, set against prior national surveys of Jewish and Muslim Americans, suggest that observance of major holy days may be more consistent in some minority traditions than among the Christian majority—a possibility that should unsettle any assumption that American religion has a single expression.

A country this religiously varied is best understood and served by institutions that recognize the full range of its religious life rather than assuming either uniform devotion or uniform secularity. Neither assumption fits: About 45% of respondents seldom or never attend religious services, while roughly seven in ten say that being a child of God is important to who they are.

The practical applications might include a hospital deciding whether to hire another chaplain, a school setting its calendar, an employer weighing an accommodation request, an agency choosing partners for a public health campaign, a reporter characterizing a community—each is working from some picture of how religious Americans are. If that picture comes from affiliation statistics alone, it is systematically too thin.

# Recommendations

1. **Ask about faith and spiritual support in professional settings—including with people who say they have no religion.** The most consequential implication of this survey is not about measurement but about assumption. The affiliation checkbox is an unreliable predictor of whether a person has spiritual needs, spiritual resources, or a faith community to draw on. The findings above document this at length. Among the unaffiliated, only about a quarter believe death is simply the end, and a larger share say they are unsure what they believe happens after death—the unresolved outnumber the settled. Yet in most professional settings that checkbox operates as a gate: the patient, student, or client who marks "none" is routed past every question that might have followed. Several applications follow from taking this seriously.

    - **Clinical and end-of-life care.**
      Physicians, hospice teams, and palliative care providers should take a brief spiritual history with every patient, with chaplain support if necessary. Ask whether the person draws on prayer, whether there is a community they would want notified, what support or resources they are hoping for, and what they want at the end of life. Given that even a fifth of the unaffiliated want clergy at the graveside, advance care documentation that stops at "religion: none" will fail people at important life moments.

    - **Schools and child welfare.**
      Teachers, counselors, and social workers assessing a child's welfare should consider whether the family has a faith community, whether there is something the parents are praying for, and whether a congregation is part of the child's support network. Framed as a question about the family's resources, this is neither an endorsement nor an intrusion. It is the same logic by which we already ask about support from grandparents, coaches, and neighbors.

    - **Intake design and referral.**
      Institutions should ensure that an answer of "none" does not automatically suppress the questions that follow it—and should not gate chaplaincy referrals on the affiliation field. A person who declines a label may still want a chaplain.

    - **Professional training.**
      Basic faith literacy across traditions lets professionals ask these questions competently rather than avoiding them for fear of giving offense. Avoidance is itself a substantive choice, and on this evidence it is an unhelpful one for a large share of the people being served.

    These questions should be invitational, person-led, and never coercive or proselytizing, with respect for those who genuinely want nothing. The recommendation is not to presume belief but to stop presuming its absence.

2. **Build institutions for religious pluralism as the norm.** Because roughly three-quarters of Americans place at least some importance on religion, and because religious practices documented by this survey are spread across many traditions rather than concentrated in one, institutional design should assume religious diversity rather than accommodate it as an afterthought. School and workplace calendars, dress and grooming policies, and accommodation practices should be built with religion in mind. Chaplaincy and clergy access in hospitals, hospice, correctional facilities, the military, and disaster response should extend across traditions, not only the largest ones. And legal protections for religious exercise should be understood not as concessions to a shrinking constituency but as infrastructure for a majority practice that is more internally diverse than it appears. That internal variation is measurable even within affiliations: among self-identified Christians, the share who have never been baptized ranges from about one in five to one in eight. These findings suggest that pluralism is a factual description of American religious life as much as it is a civic ideal.

3. **Engage Americans through the identities they rank first, not the ones easiest to observe.** Policymakers, journalists, researchers, and civic leaders should organize their work around the identities Americans themselves rate as most important—family and faith—rather than the party, ideology, race, or demographic category that is easiest to observe from the outside. The WSLR is unambiguous on the ordering. As reported above, family and faith identities sit at the top of the list, and political party or ideology sits at the bottom of all nine identities we asked about. Two features of that ordering matter for institutional design. First, the observable religious identity is the weaker one: "your religion"—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish—trails being a child of God by nine points, so an institution sorting people by denomination is capturing the less important of the two. Second, family is one of the highest-ranked identities for the affiliated and unaffiliated alike, which makes it the most broadly shared source of identity this survey identifies.

**Accordingly, three considerations follow.**

- Civic programming should bring people together around the roles and commitments Americans rank most highly—such as parenting, caregiving, and service—rather than political identity, which ranks lowest.
- National surveys should include additional identities that are important, since the comparison this report draws cannot be made using instruments that measure affiliation and partisanship alone.
- Likewise, reporting on communities should characterize them by what residents say matters most to them rather than primarily by how their precinct voted.

One caution accompanies these recommendations: every identity measured in this survey matters less to religious "nones" than to religiously affiliated Americans, so convening around shared identities may resonate less powerfully with the unaffiliated. Family, however, ranks near the top for both groups, making it the natural place to start. The goal is not to manufacture new sources of social cohesion but to recognize and strengthen the ones that already exist. A public life that keeps organizing itself around the identity Americans themselves rank last will keep producing an account of the country that is both incomplete and unnecessarily divisive.

# Appendix

## Sample

The Wheatley Institute Survey of Lived Religion (WSLR) has a total sample of 2,005 respondents: 433 Protestants, 476 Catholics, 425 general Christians, and 361 "nones," with the remainder religious minorities. It was conducted by Qualtrics using self-weighted quota sampling to ensure representativeness, with robust quality tests and filters.

## Comparability

Although the WSLR emphasizes questions not asked elsewhere, the questions it shares with landmark surveys produce broadly similar results, indicating it has tapped into the same religious landscape measured by established, legacy surveys. For example:

- ***Belief in God.*** The WSLR replicated the question on belief in God that the General Social Survey (GSS) asks every year. In 2026, 7% of WSLR respondents said they did not believe in God; in the GSS the figure was 6%. The agnostic option was 6% in the WSLR versus 8% in the GSS, while the most confident option ("know God exists") was 59% in the WSLR versus 51% in the GSS.
- ***Religious attendance.*** The WSLR replicated the attendance question from the Pew Religious Landscape Study. About 45% of WSLR respondents seldom or never attend services, compared with 49% in the PRLS.
- ***Share of "nones."*** Though exact wordings vary across surveys, the religiously unaffiliated make up 18% of the WSLR, 25% of the GSS, and 29% of the PRLS.
- ***Self-rated religiosity.*** The WSLR replicated the GSS self-rated religiosity question. About 21% of WSLR respondents say they are not religious at all, compared with 27% in the 2024 GSS.

## *Note on Latter-day Saint Subsample*

Of the 2,005 respondents in the Wheatley Institute Survey of Lived Religion, 25 identified as Latter-day Saint (LDS). This subsample is too small to support reliable estimates of the broader Latter-day Saint population. With a sample of this size, estimates would be imprecise and particularly sensitive to the responses of individual participants. Reporting separate findings could therefore give a misleading impression of the views or experiences of Latter-day Saints more broadly.

Accordingly, we do not report separate findings for Latter-day Saint respondents and instead include them within the "Other Christian" category where relevant to the report's broader analyses.

# Endnotes


1 Chip Rotolo, Gregory A. Smith, and Jonathan Evans, *8 in 10 Americans Say Religion Is Losing Influence in Public Life* (Pew Research Center, March 15, 2024), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/15/8-in-10-americans-say-religion-is-losing-influence-in-public-life/. In February 2024, approximately 80% of U.S. adults said religion was losing influence in American life, the highest share Pew had recorded. That share has since fallen: 61% said so in April 2026, while 37% said religion is gaining influence (the largest such share since 2002). See Chip Rotolo and Gregory A. Smith, *How Americans Feel About Religion's Influence in Government and Public Life* (Pew Research Center, May 14, 2026), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2026/05/14/how-americans-feel-about-religions-influence-in-government-and-public-life/. See also Christian Smith, *Why Religion Went Obsolete: The Demise of Traditional Faith in America* (Oxford University Press, 2025), which documents long-term declines in religious participation and institutional authority in the United States and other industrialized societies.

2 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; repr., Penguin, 1982), Lecture II, "Circumscription of the Topic."

3 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (1912; repr., Free Press, 1995), 44.

4 Bob Smietana, "Decline of Religion Remains Stalled, Says New Pew Report. But There's No Revival Yet," Religion News Service, December 8, 2025, https://religionnews.com/2025/12/08/decline-of-religion-remains-stalled-says-new-pew-report-but-theres-no-revival-yet/.

5 Gregory A. Smith et al., *Religious "Nones" in America: Who They Are and What They Believe* (Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/.

6 Gregory A. Smith et al., "Religious and Spiritual Beliefs," in *Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off* (Pew Research Center, February 26, 2025), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-and-spiritual-beliefs/. Roughly eight in ten U.S. adults (83%) say God or a universal spirit exists, and a similar share (79%) say there is something spiritual beyond the natural world.

7 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 44.

8 Richard Sosis and Eric R. Bressler, "Cooperation and Commune Longevity: A Test of the Costly Signaling Theory of Religion," *Cross-Cultural Research* 37, no. 2 (2003): 211–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/1069397103037002003.

9 Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1180–1211, https://doi.org/10.1086/230409.

10 Pew Research Center, "Marriage, Families and Children," in *Jewish Americans in 2020* (Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/marriage-families-and-children/. Half of U.S. Jews who were raised Jewish or had at least one Jewish parent (51%) say they had a bar or bat mitzvah, including 63% of Jews by religion and 23% of Jews of no religion.

11 Jeff Diamant, "Jews in U.S. Are Far Less Religious Than Christians and Americans Overall, at Least by Traditional Measures" (Pew Research Center, May 13, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/05/13/jews-in-u-s-are-far-less-religious-than-christians-and-americans-overall-at-least-by-traditional-measures/. Roughly six-in-ten Jewish Americans overall say they held or attended a Passover Seder in the year prior to the survey, including 74% of Jews by religion and 30% of Jews of no religion.

12 Pew Research Center, "Religious Beliefs and Practices," in *U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream* (Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/religious-beliefs-and-practices/. Eight in ten U.S. Muslims say they fast during Ramadan; one in five do not.

13 Mark Nielsen, Michelle C. Langley, Ceri Shipton, and Rohan Kapitány, "*Homo neanderthalensis* and the Evolutionary Origins of Ritual in *Homo sapiens*," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* B 375, no. 1805 (2020): 20190424, https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2019.0424.