Most Americans Maintain Belief Beyond Declines in Religious Affiliation, New Survey Finds

Wheatley Institute report reveals that family and spiritual identities far outrank political ones, and that even religious "nones" maintain deep spiritual beliefs

PROVO, Utah, September 24, 2026 – The news about religious practice over the last decade has primarily focused on its decline. But disaffiliation is not evidence that Americans have abandoned faith or spiritual experience. In fact, as a new report by the Wheatley Institute illustrates, the interior life of religion remains vibrant, with three-quarters of Americans placing at least some importance on religion and four in ten thanking God multiple times a day — a higher share than those who regularly express gratitude to another person.

A four-part series, the Wheatley Survey of Lived Religion is a nationally representative survey of 2,005 American 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, Eastern Orthodox, or Latter-day Saint), and the religiously unaffiliated (those who do not identify with any religion).

The first report, the State of Religion and Spirituality in America, released today, explores what Americans believe, what they practice when no one is watching, what they draw on under stress and what they hope for at the end of life. It examines Americans' private spiritual practices, personal beliefs, community worship and views on the afterlife.

“Religious affiliation remains an important part of American life, but it captures only one dimension of our religious experience,” said Paul Lambert, Religion Initiative Director at Wheatley Institute. “With this survey, we wanted to determine how spiritual beliefs transcend the boundaries of religious affiliation. What we found is that most Americans have an interior religious life that is robust and active, with many praying, thanking, reading and listening – often daily and often alone.”

Belief itself remains nearly universal, with about nine in ten respondents saying they believe in God or a higher power, and roughly eight in ten saying there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it.

Additional key findings of the first report include:

- 77% thank God at least monthly, and four in ten do so multiple times each day, a higher share than those who regularly express gratitude to another person
- 47% of Americans reported having a spiritual experience within the past month and 58% said they felt God was telling them something during that time
- About a quarter of Americans reported sensing God's communication within the past day, and about half within the past week
- Only about a quarter of the unaffiliated believe that death is simply the end
- About half of religious "nones" still believe that objects, people or place can hold spiritual energy or power, while 40% believe that the universe guides them "towards certain people and events."
- About a quarter of religious "nones" pray daily

The survey also asked respondents to self-report the importance of various identities – such as the importance of being a parent or child or of a certain nationality or political party. Family and spiritual identities rank the most important, while political identities are the least. For example, 70% or more of people rank "being a son or daughter," "being a father or mother," "being a child of God," and "being a divine creation" as moderately, very or extremely important, while only 55% said the same for political party or ideology.

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.

"Americans are less churched, not less religious," said Shima Baradaran Baughman, Woodruff J. Deem Professor of Law and a Distinguished Fellow at the Wheatley Institute. "Americans rank God far above party, even in a season of political noise. What we need now is to reinvest in the institutions that give that faith a home."

The full report, written by Shima Baughman, Stephen Cranney, and Paul Lambert can be found at Wheatley.byu.edu/LivedReligion.

About Wheatley Institute

Wheatley Institute engages students, scholars, thought leaders, and the public in research-supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government.

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