

# THE DENOMINATIONS: THE CHANGING MAP OF RELIGIOUS AMERICA

*By Benton Johnson*

The United States is by far the most religious of all the major industrial nations. Compared to the citizens of other developed countries, Americans are the most likely to attend worship services regularly, to believe in God, and to donate money to religious organizations and causes. The contrast with such nations as Sweden, France and Great Britain is particularly striking.

Social scientists do not agree on why Americans are so religious. Some believe that loss of interest in the supernatural is an inevitable by-product of scientifically and technologically advanced civilization. They argue that religion remains popular in America only because the churches have accommodated their teachings to the materialistic temper of modern times. Others argue, however, that religion flourishes best in any environment that allows different faiths to compete freely for followers, and where it is not institutionally identified with the state. They point out that in Europe old state church monopolies still restrain competition to some extent. In America, where pluralism and competition are the rule, religion prospers.

National surveys show that 25% of Americans identify themselves as Catholics and 19% as Baptists. In descending order, the other large denominational families are the Methodist, the Lutheran, the Holiness and Pentecostal, the Presbyterian and Reformed, the Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ, the Episcopalian, the Mormon (LDS), and the Congregationalist and United Church of Christ. These ten families account for 84% of all religious preferences. Two percent identify themselves as Jews and 8% have no religion. The remaining 6% are distributed among a vast array of small denominations and independent congregations.

## **Church Membership Has Risen, Not Declined**

Many Americans who express a religious preference do not actually belong to or participate regularly in a religious group. In fact, a little less than 40% attend religious services in any given week. The proportion belonging to a religious body has grown steadily, however, from the late eighteenth century until the present, though the rate of increase has slowed in recent decades. Currently, approximately six out of every ten adult Americans are formally affiliated with a religious group.

*By 1990, the old mainline Protestant churches had lost at least one-fifth and perhaps as much as one-third of the membership total they claimed just a quarter-century earlier. The extent and persistence of this drop-off in membership has no parallel in U.S. religious experience.*

Religious membership and participation do not vary greatly by size of community, but they do by region. The most distinctive region is the West which, except for the Mormon areas, has long had the lowest rates of religious belief and activity. The strength of the major religious bodies also varies by region. Baptists are most numerous in the South, Jews are concentrated in large metropolitan areas, and Catholic strength is greatest in the Northeast, in Louisiana and among the Hispanic population of the Southwest. The Methodists are more evenly distributed across the nation than any other large religious family.

## **A Changing Religious Landscape**

During the twentieth century new divisions and new coalitions have changed the religious landscape of America. The most important new division is between theological traditionalists of various stripes, and liberals who would modify these traditional teachings in the light of modern science and historical scholarship. By the end of the nineteenth century, liberals had begun to exert an influence in such old-line Protestant denominations as the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians. As the decades went by, they gained control of the leading seminaries, pulpits, and national agencies of these bodies. In the process, old denominational distinctions and loyalties were eroded and new interchurch alliances were formed based upon liberal theologies and programs.

Early in the century some liberal Protestant leaders began promoting the view that the mission of the church is not to save souls but to build a new social order of justice and compassion, and many of them joined forces with the liberal and progressive movement in American politics. In the 1960s this new political emphasis took the form of lay and clergy involvement in the civil rights movement and in protests against the Vietnam war. More recently, liberal Protestants have supported the Equal Rights Amendment, the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, abortion rights for women, and laws forbidding discrimination against homosexuals. For modern religious liberals, progressive social action is the very essence of Christian witness.

## **The Conservative Reaction**

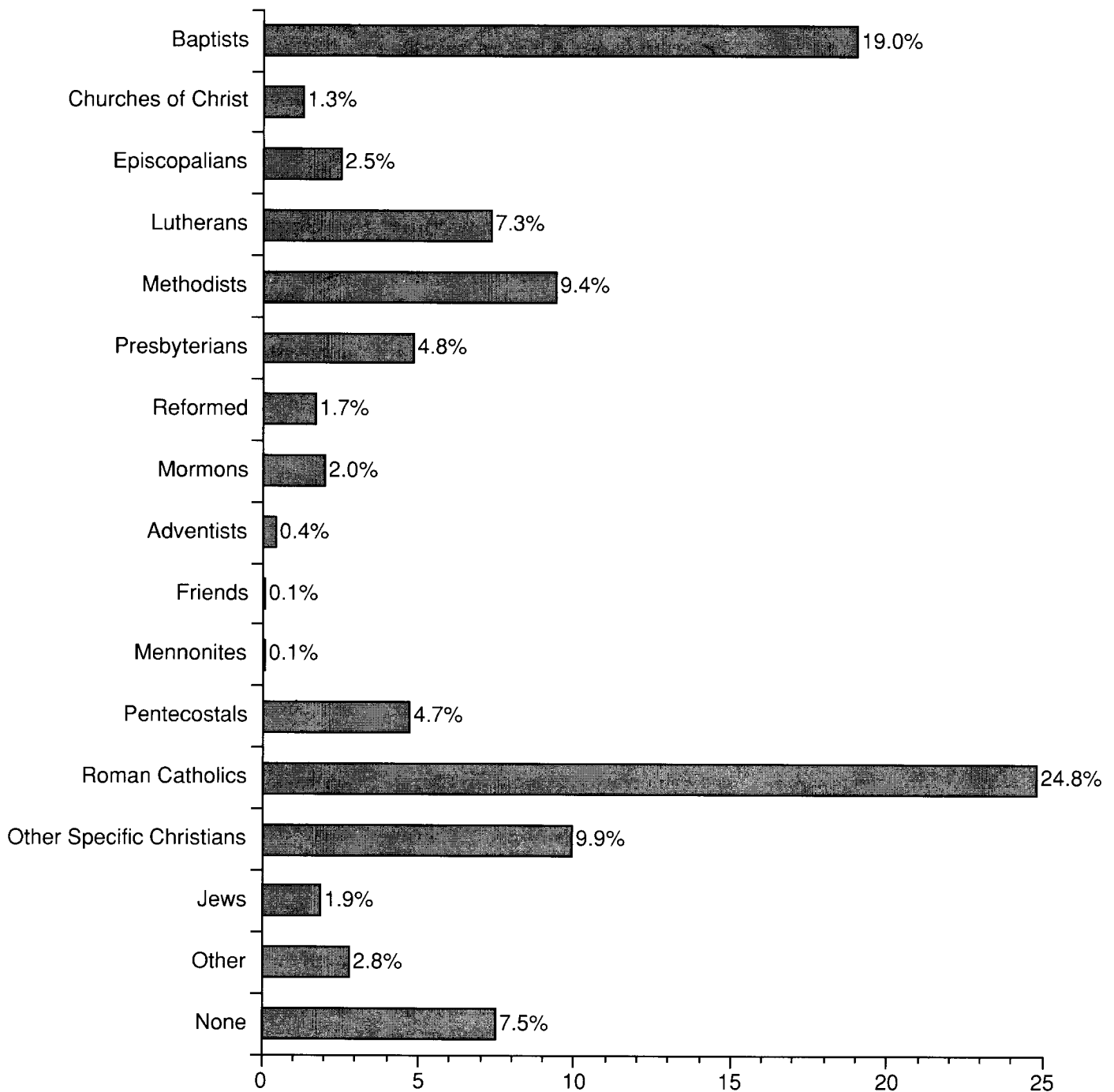
The liberal shift in Protestant theology was strongly resisted by conservative leaders. The first wave of resistance was

# Denominational Memberships 1960 and 1990

	Membership in 000s		Change in 000s	Denomination's Share of Total Membership		% Gain/Loss From 1960 Base
	1960	1990		1960	1990	
Baptists	21149	32788	11639	18.5	21.0	55.0
Southern Baptists	9732	15038	5307	8.5	9.6	54.5
Churches of Christ	3965	3794	-172	3.5	2.4	-4.3
Disciples	1802	1040	-762	1.6	0.7	-42.3
Episcopalians	3444	2446	-998	3.0	1.6	-29.0
Lutherans	8081	8379	298	7.1	5.4	3.7
Missouri Synod	2391	2603	212	2.1	1.7	8.9
Methodists	12425	13266	841	10.9	8.5	6.8
United Methodists	10641	8905	-1736	9.3	5.7	-16.3
Presbyterians	4333	4281	-53	3.8	2.7	-1.2
Reformed	2726	2176	-551	2.4	1.4	-20.2
United Church of Christ	2241	1599	-642	2.0	1.0	-28.6
Mormons	1648	4462	2814	1.4	2.9	170.8
Adventists	355	751	396	0.3	0.5	111.4
Moravian/Brethren	345	306	-39	0.3	0.2	-11.4
Churches of God	189	254	65	0.2	0.2	34.7
Friends	126	121	-5	0.1	0.1	-4.1
Mennonites	160	284	124	0.1	0.2	77.3
Pentecostals	1892	9891	7999	1.7	6.3	422.7
Eastern Churches	2824	4576	1752	2.5	2.9	62.1
Roman Catholics	42105	58568	16463	36.8	37.4	39.1
Jews	5367	5981	614	4.7	3.8	11.4
Jehovah's Witnesses	250	858	608	0.2	0.5	243.3
Other Bodies	3066	3254	188	2.7	2.1	6.1
Total Members	114450	156435	41985	100.0	100.0	36.7
Total Resident Pop.	178464	248710	70246	155.9	159.0	39.4

**Note:** Indented denominations are subsets of totals shown immediately above them.  
**Source:** 1962 and 1992 *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*.

# Self-Described Religious Identification, 1989-1991



**Note:** Those identifying themselves as Protestant were first asked if they were Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian. If they claimed "other Protestant affiliation" they were probed for a more specific affiliation. Answers grouped into broad families shown.

**Source:** Combined General Social Surveys, 1989-1991.

the fundamentalist movement, which emerged in several liberal-leaning denominations during the 1920s. Although the fundamentalists did not succeed in stemming the tide of liberalism in those bodies, they found many allies in other religious groups and they pioneered in the use of radio as a means of communicating their message. The aggressive and uncompromising posture of many American fundamentalists led journalists and scholars to apply the term fundamentalism to any militantly conservative religious movement, e.g., those currently flourishing in certain Islamic nations.

In the 1940s, a new coalition of moderate fundamentalists and other Protestant conservatives began using the old term “evangelical” to refer to themselves. Although they came from many denominations, Baptists were especially highly represented. The new evangelicals sponsored a wide variety of ventures, among which were the Billy Graham crusades, various television ministries, and programs designed to convert youth. The term “born again,” which refers to a conversion experience claimed by many evangelicals, received wide publicity after Jimmy Carter used it in 1976 to describe himself. The modern evangelical movement has been far more influential than the earlier fundamentalism.

### **Increasing Political Engagement**

Until the mid-1970s, most evangelical leaders remained aloof from politics, though many were known to have markedly conservative views. But the Supreme Court decision on abortion, the new women’s movement and the new movement for gay rights led evangelicals like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson to mount a political opposition to these liberal innovations. Although they have not entirely succeeded in turning back the liberal tide, evangelical voters gave sub-

stantial support to the conservative resurgence of the 1980s, most notably in the elections of 1984 and 1988.

Before 1960, the Catholic church was largely unaffected by the controversy between liberals and conservatives, but the Second Vatican Council, held in Rome during that decade, authorized many liberal reforms in Catholic teaching and practice. As a result, both liberal and conservative factions emerged over such issues as the Latin mass, the practice of birth control, the marriage of priests and the role of women in the church. Since the 1970s, evangelicals and conservative Catholics have worked together to defeat the ERA and to oppose abortion, thus helping to break down old barriers of hostility and suspicion. On the liberal side, Catholics and Protestants now cooperate freely on various projects.

American religious groups differ markedly in their growth rates. Thanks to their high fertility and aggressive recruiting, the Mormons are growing rapidly. In Protestantism, the fastest growing bodies are those evangelical churches that actively recruit and offer messages and programs aimed at specific population groups, e.g., young, lower middle-class white families in urban areas. The pentecostal and charismatic branches of evangelicalism are entirely a product of the twentieth century and have spawned such sizable denominations as the Assemblies of God and such recent bodies as Calvary Chapel.

On the other hand, many old-line religious groups have not kept pace with the growth of the US population. They have been especially hard put to retain the loyalties of those members born after World War II. Large numbers of Jews are no longer religiously observant, Catholic mass attendance has declined since the late 1960s, and all the liberal-influenced

Protestant denominations have lost members steadily for almost thirty years. Declining birth rates, aging membership, a reluctance to seek new members, and an unwillingness to devise new messages and programs attractive to young adults are among the factors contributing to the general decline.

The decline of the so-called mainline Protestant churches—Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and kindred denominations, shown in the accompanying charts, is especially striking. As recently as the 1950s, their memberships’ rates of growth equalled or surpassed that of the US population as a whole. But their growth slowed in the early 1960s, and by the latter part of the decade they were losing ground in overall membership. This decline has continued right to the present. By 1990, the old mainline Protestant churches had lost at least one-fifth and perhaps as much as one-third of the membership total they claimed just a quarter-century earlier. The extent and persistence of this drop-off in membership has no parallel in US religious experience. The proportion of Americans affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations is now at its twentieth-century low. And, in considering these data, it’s important to keep in mind that church membership overall has been rising over this span.

The great majority of those who have left the old-line bodies have not, however, joined other religions. The much-publicized “cult” movements of the past two decades have been unable to attract more than tiny cadres of long-term followers. And despite the popularity of Shirley MacLaine’s works and the media coverage of New Age events, only a minuscule proportion of Americans identify themselves with the New Age movement.

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