

Why Are Millennials Leaving Religion?

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By Joy Pullman

FORT WAYNE, Ind.—While conventional wisdom about young Americans' increased faithlessness says many will come back to church when they marry and have kids, it's likely many millennials will remain secular instead, suggests a recent study.

This is for three reasons, write Daniel Cox and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux at FiveThirtyEight.com.

- Millennials' parents taught them fewer religious practices.
- More have secular spouses than ever before.
- Young parents as a whole are less likely to believe they need to teach faith to their children.

Leaving religion for good

This means "there's mounting evidence that today's younger generations may be leaving religion for good," the pair write.

The United States has seen a surge in people who claim no adherence to a religion, who are often called "nones." A large part of this group comprises younger Americans.

In 2018, American church membership hit an all-time low of approximately 50 percent, according to Gallup: "Since the turn of the century, the percentage of U.S. adults with no religious affiliation has more than doubled."

Only 42 percent of millennials, ages 18-38, were church members in 2018.

Last spring, the General Social Survey found for the first time that Americans who claim "no religion" were statistically the same size as those who call themselves evangelicals, and pretty close to the size of self-identified American Catholics.

Leftist politics

One of the top sources of people losing their religion is leftist politics.

The December American Enterprise Institute study, which surveyed 2,561 people, found: "Democrats brought up in religious households are roughly

three times more likely than Republicans to have left religion. Nearly one in four (23 percent) Democrats brought up in a religion no longer identify with a religious tradition, while only 8 percent of Republicans say the same.”

Although general skepticism seems to be the top reason cited, people who have left faith also indicate that politics, particularly sexual politics, is a major contributor to their apostasy.

In 2018, 49 percent of nones told Pew they’re faithless because they don’t like religious teachings on social issues.

Six in ten young people in the AEI report said they viewed religious people as less “tolerant” than others, and 55 percent agreed “religion causes more problems for society than it solves.”

Leftist mainline denominations

This is also reflected in the fact that the top source of nones seems to be leftist mainline denominations, which decades ago began jettisoning orthodox Christian teachings to conform to social and political leftism.

Their hallmarks have included rejecting divine revelation and especially attacking the Sixth Commandment against sex outside lifelong, heterosexual marriage.

“The rise of the religiously unaffiliated tracks closely with the decline of mainline Protestantism beginning in the early 1990s,” Eastern Illinois University professor Ryan Burge told the Religion News Service.

“The biggest story is that ‘no religion’ is coming from the mainline,” he said. “Mainliners are jumping ship.”

Lowest marriage rates

A lack of sexual fidelity and honor for marriage also contributes to faithlessness, as the AEI study and others explored. The AEI study found that increasing rates of marriages to nonbelieving spouses have dampened the likelihood that millennials will return to church after they marry, as previous generations tended.

But also, even if marriage pulled people back to church as effectively now as it has formerly, millennials have the lowest marriage rate in U.S. history, further weakening that effect.

“Scholars have long recognized that religion and marriage are linked in important ways, with married people tending to be more religiously active than unmarried people,” says a 2014 Pew study.

That study noted, however, that both unmarried and married Americans have fewer religious commitments now than in previous generations, although married Americans are still more likely to be religious.

Pattern of their parents

Millennials have also one of the highest likelihoods in U.S. history to have divorced or never-married parents, a pattern they’re doubling down on with their own few children and the highest rate of single motherhood in U.S. history.

The AEI study found that parents who are not married are far less likely than married parents to engage in behaviors that reflect and create faith, such as attending church, praying before meals, enrolling their children in religious education, and reading scripture with their families.

"[Y]ounger adults with married parents are about twice as likely to say they attended services at least weekly during their childhood as are those whose parents were divorced or separated (41 percent vs. 20 percent)," the study says.

Married families often more religious

Broken families were approximately half as likely as married families to engage in each of the religious practices the poll asked about.

The flipside of this is that religious and married parents nurture substantially more children than do unmarried and unreligious parents, and, of the children of parents who show a "very high" commitment to religious practices such as religious education, reading scripture at home, and church attendance, 93 percent remained in the faith as adults.

The AEI study indicates that parents strongly influence whether their children remain in the faith, primarily by modeling religious commitment and ensuring religious instruction.

Not take children to church

While baby boomers identified with Christianity in much higher percentages than millennials do, the majority of boomers failed to take their kids to church or religious education, and neither prayed as a family nor read the Bible at home.

A low-commitment faith is the most likely for kids to shake.

Conversely, a high-commitment faith is the most likely to be passed on: "Americans with very high levels of religious involvement during their childhood are about 10 times more likely to pray or read with their children (87 percent), attend worship services with them (84 percent), or send them to Sunday school (80 percent)."

Younger than 18

The survey also found that young people's departure from faith begins much earlier than college, suggesting the drastically increased secularism of public K-12 schooling is also a significant faith-weakening influence.

"Fifty-seven percent of Americans who disaffiliated say they did so before reaching adulthood, about one-third (35 percent) report that they disaffiliated between the age of 18 and 29, and only 9 percent say they left after the age of 30," says the AEI report.

This trend was even stronger among millennials, as 70 percent of millennial nones "report that they stopped identifying with their childhood religion when they were younger than 18 years old."

This is reinforced by the survey responses of nones who indicated they are faithless because they think faith and reason are incompatible, something Christians don't believe but is a dominant myth within the American education-industrial complex.

Anti-religious culture

As American churches shrink, they are doing it against the backdrop of an increasingly anti-religion culture.

Historically, persecution has expanded Christianity.

But it's also going to make for increasingly bitter culture wars until the nones return to a smaller minority who see reason to appreciate the rights to expression and worship that the U.S. Constitution guarantees all Americans.