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The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust

Many Americans seem to have found no alternative method to build a sense of community.


By Derek Thompson



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As an agnostic, I have spent most of my life thinking about the decline of faith in America in mostly positive terms. Organized religion seemed, to me, beset by scandal and entangled in noxious politics. So, I thought, what is there really to mourn? Only in the past few years have I come around to a different view. Maybe religion, for all of its faults, works a bit like a retaining wall to hold back the destabilizing pressure of American hyper-individualism, which threatens to swell and spill over in its absence.

More than one-quarter of Americans now identify as atheists, agnostics, or religiously “unaffiliated,” according to a new survey of 5,600 U.S. adults by the Public Religion Research Institute. This is the highest level of non-religiosity in the poll’s history. Two-thirds of nonbelievers were brought up in at least nominally religious households, like me. (I grew up in a Reform Jewish home that I would describe as haphazardly religious. In kindergarten, my parents encouraged my sister and me to enthusiastically celebrate Hanukkah—and, just as fervently, to believe in Santa Claus.) But more Americans today have “converted” out of religion than have converted to all forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam combined. No faith’s evangelism has been as successful in this century as religious skepticism.

Secularization is old news. The scientific revolution that pitted the Church against stargazers like Galileo comes from the 1600s, and Nietzsche famously declared “God is dead” in the 1880s. But even as secularism surged throughout the developed world in the 20th century, America’s religiosity remained exceptional. Seven in 10 Americans told Gallup that they belonged to a church in 1937, and even by the 1980s, roughly 70 percent said they still belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque.

Suddenly, in the 1990s, the ranks of nonbelievers surged. An estimated 40 million people—one in eight Americans—stopped going to church in the past 25 years, making it the “largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history,” according to the religion writer Jake Meador. In 2021, membership in houses of worship fell below a majority for the first time on record.

The sudden decline of religion likely relates to changes in both politics and family life. In the 1970s and '80s, the religious right became a formidable fundraising machine for the Republican Party. As the GOP consolidated its advantage among conservative Christians, religion seemed less appealing to liberal young people, especially if they or their parents already had a tenuous relationship with the Church. In the late 1980s, only one in 10 liberals said they didn't belong to any religion; 30 years later, that figure was about *four* in 10. Meanwhile, the decline of marriage, especially among low-income Americans, accompanied their move away from the Church.

That relationship with organized religion provided many things at once: not only a connection to the divine, but also a historical narrative of identity, a set of rituals to organize the week and year, and a community of families. PRRI found that the most important feature of religion for the dwindling number of Americans who still attend services a few times a year included “experiencing religion in a community” and “instilling values in their children.”

When I read the PRRI survey, this emphasis on community is what caught my eye. As I recently reported, the United States is in the midst of a historically unprecedented decline in face-to-face socializing. The social collapse is steepest for some of the groups with the largest declines in religiosity.

For example, young people, who are fleeing religion faster than older Americans, have also seen the largest decline in socializing. Boys and girls ages 15 to 19 have reduced

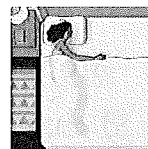
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their hangouts by more than three hours a week, according to the American Time Use Survey. There is no statistical record of any period in U.S. history where young people were less likely to attend religious services, and also no period when young people have spent more time on their own.

A similar story holds for working-class Americans. In 2019, a team of researchers published a survey based on long interviews conducted from 2000 to 2013 with older, low-income men without a college degree in working-class neighborhoods around the country. They found that, since the 1970s, church attendance among white men without a college degree had fallen even more than among white college graduates. For many of these men, the loss of religion went hand in hand with the retreat from marriage. “As marriage declined,” the authors wrote, “men’s church attendance might have fallen in tandem.” Today, low-income and unmarried men have more alone time than almost any other group, according to time-use data.

Did the decline of religion cut some people off from a crucial gateway to civic engagement, or is religion just one part of a broader retreat from associations and memberships in America? “It’s hard to know what the causal story is here,” Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist at NYU, told me. But what’s undeniable is that nonreligious Americans are also less civically engaged. This year, the Pew Research Center reported that religiously unaffiliated Americans are less likely to volunteer, less likely to feel satisfied with their community and social life, and more likely to say they feel lonely.

“Clearly more Americans are spending Sunday mornings on their couches, and it’s affected the quality of our collective life,” he said.

Klinenberg doesn’t blame individual Americans for these changes. He sees our civic retreat as a story about place. In his book *Palaces for the People*, Klinenberg reported that Americans today have fewer shared spaces where connections are formed. “People today say they just have fewer places to go for collective life,” he said. “Places that used to anchor community life, like libraries and school gyms and union halls, have become less accessible or shuttered altogether.” Many people, having lost the scaffolding of organized religion, seem to have found no alternative method to build a sense of community.

Imagine, by analogy, a parallel universe where Americans suddenly gave up on sit-down restaurants. In surveys, they named many reasonable motivations for their abstinence: the expense, the overuse of salt and sugar and butter, the temptation to drink alcohol. As restaurants disappeared by the hundreds, some mourned their closure, while others said it simply didn’t matter. After all, there were still plenty of ways for people to feed themselves. Over time, however, Americans as a group never found another social activity to replace their dining-out time. They saw less of one another with each passing decade. Sociologists noted that the demise of restaurants had correlated with a rise in aloneness, just as the CDC noticed an increase in anxiety and depression.

I've come to believe that something like this story is happening, except with organized religion playing the role of restaurants. On an individual basis, people can give any number of valid-sounding reasons for not frequenting a house of worship. But a behavioral shift that is fully understandable on the individual level has coincided with, and even partly exacerbated, a great rewiring of our social relations.

And America didn't simply lose its religion without finding a communal replacement. Just as America's churches were depopulated, Americans developed a new relationship with a technology that, in many ways, is the diabolical opposite of a religious ritual: the smartphone. As the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes in his new book, *The Anxious Generation*, to stare into a piece of glass in our hands is to be removed from our bodies, to float placelessly in a content cosmos, to skim our attention from one piece of ephemera to the next. The internet is timeless in the best and worst of ways—an everything store with no opening or closing times. “In the virtual world, there is no daily, weekly, or annual calendar that structures when people can and cannot do things,” Haidt writes. In other words, digital life is *disembodied*, *asynchronous*, *shallow*, and *solitary*.

Religious rituals are the opposite in almost every respect. They put us in our body, Haidt writes, many of them requiring “some kind of movement that marks the activity as devotional.” Christians kneel, Muslims prostrate, and Jews *daven*. Religious ritual also fixes us in time, forcing us to set aside an hour or day for prayer, reflection,

or separation from daily habit. (It's no surprise that people describe a scheduled break from their digital devices as a "Sabbath.") Finally, religious ritual often requires that we make contact with the sacred in the presence of other people, whether in a church, mosque, synagogue, or over a dinner-table prayer. In other words, the religious ritual is typically *embodied, synchronous, deep, and collective*.

I'm not advocating that every atheist and agnostic in America immediately choose a world religion and commit themselves to weekly church (or synagogue, or mosque) attendance. But I wonder if, in forgoing organized religion, an isolated country has discarded an old and proven source of ritual at a time when we most need it. Making friends as an adult can be hard; it's especially hard without a scheduled weekly reunion of congregants. Finding meaning in the world is hard too; it's especially difficult if the oldest systems of meaning-making hold less and less appeal. It took decades for Americans to lose religion. It might take decades to understand the entirety of what we lost.

Derek Thompson is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of the Work in Progress newsletter.