



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 28, 2011

Is Religion Becoming Extinct?

“A study using census data from nine countries shows that religion there is set for extinction, say researchers,” reported the [BBC](#), with the survey demonstrating “a steady rise in those claiming no religious affiliation.” The BBC noted that the team conducting the study “took census data stretching back as far as a century from countries in which the census queried religious affiliation: Australia, Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Switzerland.”



One of the team members, Dr. Richard Wiener of the Research Corporation for Science Advancement and the University of Arizona, explained that the model he and two fellow researchers from Northwestern University used to study the data suggests that in a “large number of modern secular democracies, there’s been a trend that folk are identifying themselves as non-affiliated with religion.” Wiener noted that “in the Netherlands the number was 40 percent, and the highest we saw was in the Czech Republic, where the number was 60 percent.”

The study found that individuals in a given society tend to gravitate toward groups in the society where the numbers are the largest — meaning, people like to hang out in the popular crowds. Wiener and his fellow researchers explained that in the nine nations noted, “the perceived utility of religious non-affiliation is greater than that of adhering to a religion,” and so the model seems to predict “continued growth of non-affiliation, tending toward the disappearance of religion.”

Wiener said that while the model does not take into account all the “complicated things ... going on with any one individual” in a given demographic, it does offer “a suggestive result” of where people’s faith may be heading in the countries in question.”

So how does the United States fit into the trend toward unbelief? Writing in the [Washington Post](#), religion reporter Brad Hirschfield noted that while not included in the recent study, “the trend line in the United States has been interpreted in similar ways by other scholars, most recently because of polling conducted for the [American Religious Identification Survey](#) in which the fastest growing religious group in America was the ‘nones’ — i.e. people indicating that none of the categories offered by the study fit how they would describe themselves when it came to religion.”

In its reporting on the study, the [Heritage Foundation](#) suggested that Wiener and his fellow researchers may have missed a few pieces of the model they assembled. Contrary to what their study seemed to find, religion in general “has not only continued through the course of human history but thrived in a variety of cultural contexts. Clearly, the social group competition idea could not explain early Christian history and other episodes over the centuries where religious minorities — even persecuted minorities — have continued to attract adherents and grow dramatically. And in modern societies, Islam is rapidly growing across the globe, and worldwide Pentecostal membership is surging.”



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And even as organized religions and denominations in America continue to suffer and lose members, there appears to be no indication of a reciprocal upsurge in membership among the [American Atheists](#). In fact, notes Heritage, the latest studies show that over “60 percent of Americans have no doubt that God exists, and almost 40 percent frequently practice their faith. The [majority of Americans](#) still hold to some religious belief.”

In all the discussion of trends and statistics on religious belief, it is important to note, as even the researchers in the latest study did, that research models can’t account for individual inclinations and attitudes, focusing instead on group dynamics. What beats in the hearts of each group member can throw a huge monkey wrench into neat rows of findings and predictions. “Suffice it to say that there’s more to religion and its future than current surveys of religious affiliation can capture,” noted the folks at Heritage.

In short, man was created with an innate need to know God—and to be known by Him. As long as that spark remains, there will be no danger of an end to faith.



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