



Karl Zinsmeister | Winter 2019 [Source](#)

From its founding, the United States has been the most religious modern nation on earth. And that devotion has fueled many successes in character development, mutual aid, social reform, and national productivity. Yet right from the beginning, American religious activity has been cyclical—flowing and ebbing and flowing again. Historians have identified up to four “great awakenings” in U.S. history where religious conviction surged. In between were periods of backsliding.

Today, we are in a period of decline. Steep decline.

Open antagonism toward faith is increasingly common in the U.S. There are now regular calls for crimping longstanding religious protections. *New York Times* religion columnist Mark Oppenheimer urged that the peak of the gay marriage debate was a good occasion to end the historic tax exemption for houses of worship. The insistence that expressions of faith must be expunged from national discussions, from education, even from sporting and other public events, is on the rise. “There are a lot of nonbelievers who want religious views kept out of the public square entirely. That’s a big problem,” pastor Tim Keller recently told *Philanthropy*.

Underlying this resistance to religion is an assumption that faith is not important to the functioning of our nation. It has little social value, according to this view, and may even be harmful to citizens and the republic in various ways. Rising numbers of Americans believe that religious activity can be stopped or pushed entirely into private sanctums without any public cost.

Those Americans are mistaken.

American faith takes a tumble

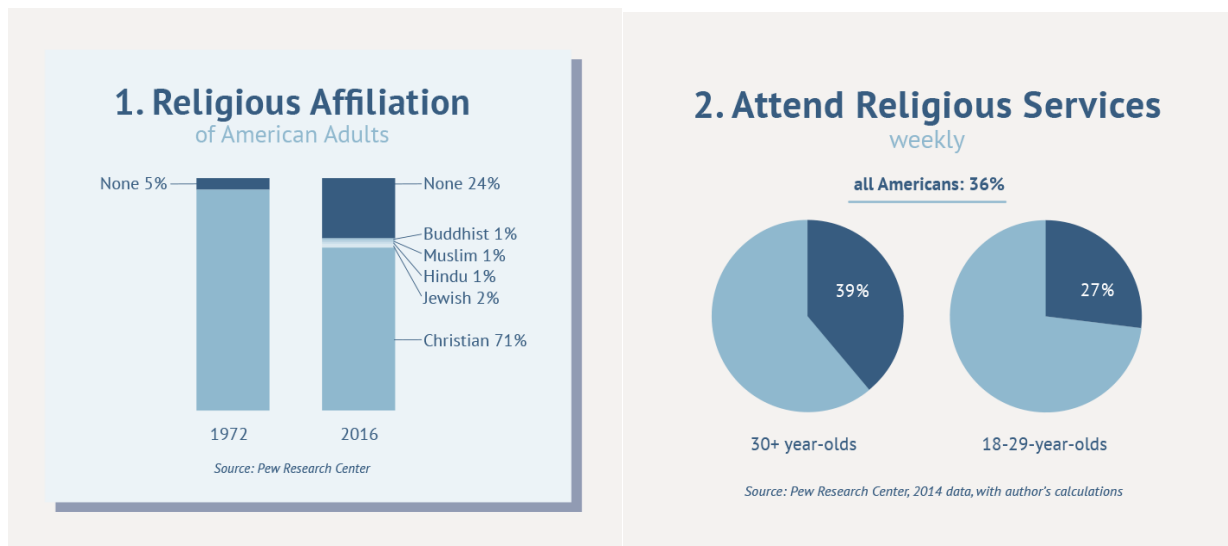
As recently as 1972, 95 percent of Americans affirmed a religious affiliation. By 2016 that had fallen to 76 percent. (See graph 1) The proportion of adults who attend religious services weekly is now down to 36 percent. (See graph 2)

Younger Americans in particular are falling away. Just 27 percent of adults under 30 attend services weekly. And nearly four out of ten 18-29-year-olds now say they have no religious affiliation. (See graph 3)

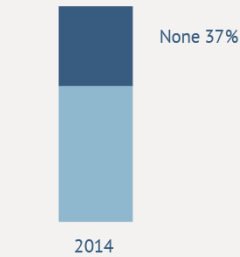
What does it mean to be religiously unaffiliated? Well, roughly six out of ten of this group consider themselves secular, and three out of ten are active atheists or agnostics. The small remainder identify as “religious” but with no particular faith. Most of the unaffiliated are suspicious of religion.

A large majority of today’s religiously unaffiliated Americans believe that religious institutions do little or nothing to solve social problems. (See graph 4) As a result, more of the U.S. population as a whole now say religion is “part of the problem” than say it is “part of the solution.” (See graph 5)

When it comes specifically to philanthropy, 57 percent of all Americans today believe that efforts to help the poor, comfort the needy, relieve disaster victims, and otherwise serve the common good would be just as prevalent “if there were no people of faith or religious organizations to do them.” (See graph 6) As a factual matter, is that accurate?



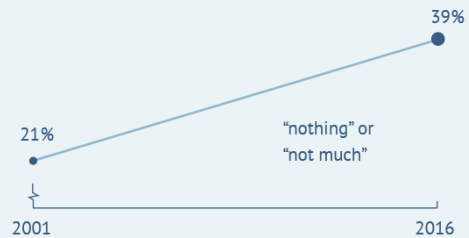
3. Religious Affiliation of 18-29-year-olds



Source: Pew Research Center

4. Who Needs Churches?

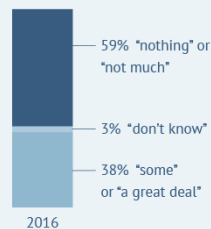
"Churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship contribute _____ to solving important social problems"



4. Who Needs Churches? *cont.*

"Churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship contribute _____ to solving important social problems"

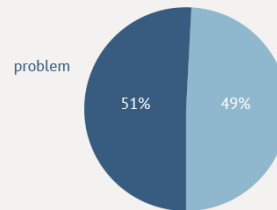
among Americans
with no religious affiliation:



2016

5. Is Religion the Problem or Solution?

"When it comes to issues and what happens today in our country, would you say that religion is part of the problem or is it part of the solution?"



Source: Heart + Mind poll, 2017

The humanitarian habits of religious people

When researchers document how people spend their hours and their money, religious Americans look very different from others. Pew Research Center investigators examined the behavior of a large sample of the public across a typical seven-day period. They found that among Americans who attend services weekly and pray daily, 45 percent had done volunteer work during the previous week. Among all other Americans, only 27 percent had volunteered somewhere. (See graph 7)

The capacity of religion to motivate pro-social behavior goes way beyond volunteering. Religious people are more involved in community groups. They have stronger links with their neighbors. They are more engaged with their own families. Pew has found that among Americans who attend worship weekly and pray daily, about half gather with extended family members at least once a month. For the rest of our population, it's 30 percent. (See graph 8)

Of all the “associational” activity that takes place in the U.S., almost half is church-related, according to Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam. “As a whole,” notes Tim Keller, “secularism is not good for society.” Secularism “makes people very fragmented—they might talk about community, but they aren’t sacrificing their own personal goals for community, as religion requires you to do.”

Religious practice links us in webs of mutual knowledge, responsibility, and support like no other influence. Seven out of ten weekly church attenders told Pew they consider “work to help the needy” an “essential part” of their faith. Most of them put their money and time where their mouth is: 65 percent of weekly church attenders were found to have donated either volunteer hours or money or goods to the poor within the previous week. (*See graph 9*)

Philanthropic studies show that people with a religious affiliation give away several times as much every year as other Americans. Research by the Lilly School at Indiana University found Americans with any religious affiliation made average annual charitable donations of \$1,590, versus \$695 for those with no religious affiliation. Another report using data from the Panel Study for Income Dynamics juxtaposed Americans who do not attend religious services with those who attend worship at least twice a month, and made fine-tunings to compare demographic apples to apples. The results: \$2,935 of annual charitable giving for the church attenders, versus \$704 for the non-attenders. (*See graph 10*) In addition to giving larger amounts, the religious give more often—making gifts about half again as frequently.

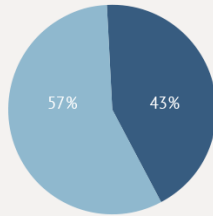
In study after study, religious practice is the behavioral variable with the strongest and most consistent association with generous giving. And people with religious motivations don’t give just to faith-based causes—they are also much likelier to give to secular causes than the nonreligious. Two thirds of people who worship at least twice a month give to secular causes, compared to less than half of non-attenders, and the average secular gift by a church attender is 20 percent bigger. (*See graph 11*)

These giving levels vary by particular faith. Mormons are the most generous Americans, both by participation level and by size of gifts. Evangelical Christians are next. Then come mainline Protestants. Catholics lag both. Jews give high dollar amounts on average, because they have high earnings, while trailing Protestant givers in donations as a share of income. (See [“Who Gives Most to Charity?”](#) in the *Almanac of American Philanthropy*.)

6. All Good without God?

"A lot of charitable work and service happens in America. All across the country, people are providing food, clothing, or disaster relief for the common good..."

"All these good works would still happen even if there were no people of faith or religious organizations to do them."



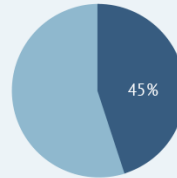
"These good works are largely due to people of faith and religious organizations."

Source: Heart + Mind poll, 2017

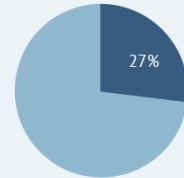
7. Did Volunteer Work

in the past 7 days

Americans who attend church weekly, pray daily



other Americans

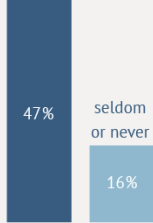


Source: Pew Research Center, 2014 data

8. Gather with Extended Family

Americans who attend church weekly, pray daily

at least 1-2 times per month



other Americans

at least 1-2 times per month



seldom or never

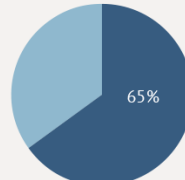


Source: Pew Research Center, 2014 data

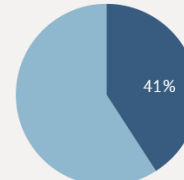
9. Gave to the Poor

in the past 7 days by donating money, time, or goods

Americans who attend church weekly, pray daily

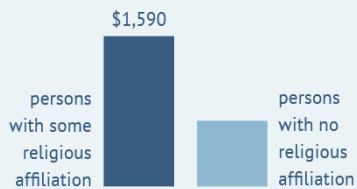


other Americans



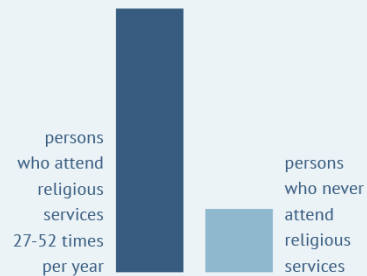
Source: Pew Research Center, 2014 data

10. Annual Charitable Donations



Source: Lilly School of Philanthropy, 2012 data

10. Annual Charitable Donations cont.



Source: Almanac of American Philanthropy, Graph 13

Religious charity dominates U.S. philanthropy

America's tradition of voluntary charitable giving is one of the clearest markers of U.S. exceptionalism. As a fraction of our income, we donate over two and a half times as much as Britons do, more than eight times as much as the Germans, and at 12 times the rate of the Japanese. American religiosity plays a central role in that distinctive pattern.

The annual *Giving USA* tabulations show a third of our donations as going to religious causes. But *Giving USA* statisticians acknowledge that this is a gross underestimate. Their calculations include only gifts to houses of worship and related mission organizations. Excluded from their total, they point out, are gifts to faith-based organizations like the Salvation Army and gospel missions for the homeless, to religious schools of all sorts, to Catholic hospitals, to the Jewish federations, to missionary organizations that serve the poor abroad, and so forth.

A consortium of Jewish funders and other independent foundations called Connected to Give commissioned studies to produce a more inclusive and accurate estimate of religiously driven giving. Its 2013 report conglomerated gifts to churches and synagogues with gifts to faith charities and found that 73 percent of all charitable giving in the U.S. goes to organizations that are explicitly religious. (*See graph 12*) Other research shows that of America's top 50 charities, 40 percent are faith-based.

An even more inclusive 2016 study by Georgetown University economist Brian Grim calculated the economic value of all U.S. religious activity. Its midrange estimate was that religion annually contributes \$1.2 trillion of socioeconomic value to the U.S. economy. This estimate includes not only the fair market value of activity connected to churches (like \$91 billion of religious schooling and daycare), and by non-church religious institutions (faith-based charities, hospitals, and colleges), but also activity by faith-related commercial organizations. That \$1.2 trillion is more than the combined revenue of America's ten biggest tech giants. It is bigger than the total economy of all but 14 entire nations.

Ways the religious help others

To get a sense of the often-invisible ways in which persons of faith help others, consider giving to the poorest of the poor overseas. The most conspicuous philanthropy done in this area is carried out by the Gates Foundation. Gates contributions in Africa and other low-income countries are the signature effort of the world's largest charitable foundation, and have had heroic effects, in areas ranging from malaria protection to HIV control to eradicating polio.

With the marvelous Gates generosity in mind, now absorb this: members of U.S. churches and synagogues send four and a half *times* as much money overseas to needy people every year as the Gates Foundation does! Much of this religious charity is applied in the hardest places, with high efficiency and low overhead, by Christians who "go the last mile" into rural, extremely

poor, or dangerous areas where governments and international bureaucracies have no effective reach. (See “Modern Missionaries” in the Spring 2018 issue of [Philanthropy](#).)

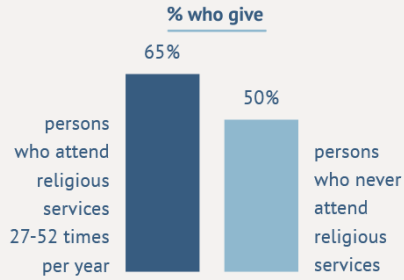
It is easy to overlook this giving, because it comes not in megagifts from billionaires but rather in millions of \$50 checks written by faithful donors to groups like Samaritan’s Purse, World Vision, International Justice Mission, Mercy Ships, American Jewish World Service, Compassion International, Catholic Medical Mission Board, MAP International, and so forth. Over the last couple decades, soaring interest in the poorest of the poor by evangelical Christians in particular has made overseas giving the fastest growing corner of American charity. One result: U.S. voluntary giving to the overseas poor now totals \$44 billion annually—far more than the \$33 billion of official aid distributed by the U.S. government.

There are many other types of charity and social healing where religious givers are dominant influences.

- Religious Americans adopt children at two and a half times the overall national rate, and they play a particularly large role in fostering and adopting troubled and hard-to-place kids. (See *graph 13*)
- Local church congregations, aided by umbrella groups like Catholic Charities, provide most of the day-to-day help that resettles refugees and asylum seekers arriving in the U.S.
- Research shows that the bulk of volunteers mentoring prisoners and their families, both while they are incarcerated and after they are released, are Christians eager to welcome offenders back into society, help them succeed, and head off returns to crime.
- The educational alternative that draws most of the headlines today is charter schooling, which serves 3 million children. Much less often acknowledged is the fact that 3.8 million children are educated every year in religious schools in the U.S. (See *graph 14*) There is evidence these religious schools offer qualitative advantages: their students experience less violence and bullying and feel more secure, exhibit better citizenship skills, are more engaged with their community, and produce average SAT scores more than 100 points higher than public-school students.
- Religious hospitals care for one out of every five U.S. hospital patients. Catholic institutions account for 16 percent of all hospital beds, and additional large health-care systems are run by Adventists, Baptists, Methodists, Jews, and other faith groups. (See *graph 15*)
- Faith-based organizations are at the forefront of both care and recovery for the homeless. A 2017 study found that 58 percent of the emergency shelter beds in 11 surveyed cities are maintained by religious providers—who also delivered many of the addiction, health-care, education, and job services needed to help the homeless regain their independence. (See *graph 16*)
- Local congregations provide 130,000 alcohol-recovery programs.
- Local congregations provide 120,000 programs that assist the unemployed.
- Local congregations provide 26,000 programs to help people living with HIV/AIDS—one ministry for every 46 people infected with the virus.
- Churches recruit a large portion of the volunteers needed to operate organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, America's thousands of food pantries and

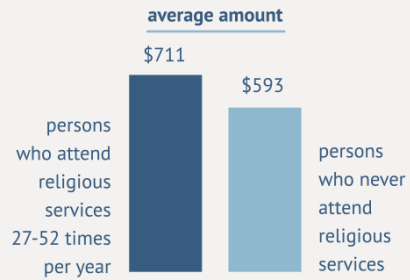
feeding programs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Red Cross, and other volunteer-dependent charities.

11. Gifts to Secular Causes



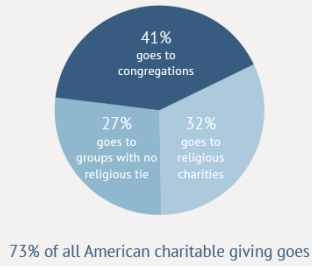
Source: Almanac of American Philanthropy, Graph 13

11. Gifts to Secular Causes *cont.*



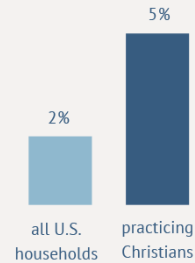
Source: Almanac of American Philanthropy, Graph 13

12. Most U.S. Charity Is Religious



Source: Connected to Give, 2013 report

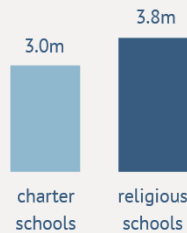
13. Rates of Adopting Children



Source: Barna Research, 2013 report

14. Alternative Schools

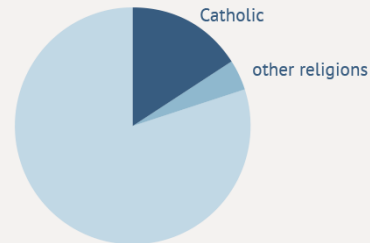
children served, K-12 grade



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2016

15. Hospital Beds

a fifth of the U.S. total are in religious institutions



Source: Journal of General Internal Medicine, 2010

One strength of religious philanthropy is sheer numbers. There are approximately 345,000 congregations stretched across our nation. If you wander America, notes economist Brian Grim, you will pass 25 churches for every Starbucks you come across. (*See graph 17*) The millions of decentralized services provided by those houses of worship include things like free or below-market space provided to community groups, preschool and daycare offerings, many types of social services, arts events, Boy Scout and sports-team sponsorships, and cash and in-kind support for neighborhood causes and needy individuals.

Multi-decade research led by University of Pennsylvania professor Ram Cnaan has found large human and economic benefits from church operations. One of his studies of older urban churches found that 89 percent of total visits to these institutions were to take part in a program, educational offering, or community event, rather than for worship. Nine out of ten beneficiaries of these community programs were not members of the religious congregation. Cnaan estimated that the economic impact alone these houses of worship have on their locale averages \$1.7 million per year. Multiply that by many thousands of churches nationwide, and then add in non-economic improvements in social life and individual behavior, and you can see the potential for large effects. (*See graph 18*)

Not surprisingly, studies of church closures conducted by Nancy Kinney and others find that shutting down a city congregation will often damage a neighborhood's viability and socioeconomic health. Conversely, active churches, religious schools sponsored by churches, and church-aided neighborhood ministries (like the Zarephath Health Center profiled in "Medical Matchmaking" in the Fall 2017 issue of *Philanthropy*) can often have strong effects in stabilizing and revitalizing communities.

It isn't just a matter of serving and healing others. People of faith also behave differently themselves. There is lots of evidence that in addition to encouraging a "brother's keeper" attitude that manifests itself in philanthropy and volunteering, religious participation also inculcates healthy habits that help individuals resist destructive personal behavior themselves.

A classic study by Harvard economist James Freeman found that black males living in inner-city poverty tracts were far less likely to engage in crime and drug use if they attended church. Church attendance was also associated with better academic performance and more success in holding jobs. Follow-up studies found that regular church attendance could even help counterbalance threats to child success like parental absence, low school quality, local drug traffic, and crime in the neighborhood.

Regular religious participation is correlated with many positive social outcomes: less poverty, fewer divorces and more marital happiness, fewer births out of wedlock, less suicide, reduced binge-drinking, less depression, better relationships. This is true among Americans of all demographic backgrounds.

Causes for concern

Given all the evidence linking religious practice with both healthy individual behavior and generosity toward others, recent patterns of religious decline are concerning. The generational trends—a third of 18-29-year-olds saying they are religiously unaffiliated, and only a quarter attending services weekly—suggest that the philanthropic sharing that has long powered social reform and self-improvement in America could sag in the future. Indeed, recent research on voluntary giving says that future is already here.

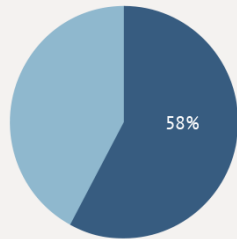
Four important investigations in the last year or so uncovered alarming declines in the breadth of American giving. A Lilly School of Philanthropy report found that the fraction of U.S. households giving to charity dropped from 68 to 56 percent from 2003 to 2015. A similar 2018 study at the University of Maryland confirmed that tumble, and added evidence that the national volunteering rate is also deteriorating. By 2015 there were 10 million fewer volunteers in the U.S. than there would have been if the 2005 rate had just held constant. Meanwhile, analysis of the last ten years of IRS data by the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* showed a drop in charitable-deduction itemizing from 30 percent of all filers to 24 percent. And a study by Texas A&M academics reported “sharp declines in overall donative behavior” over the past decade. (*See graph 19*)

It appears that not only generational change but also wealth effects are depressing religious philanthropy. While giving by the whole population has recently declined, gifts from the rich continue to be strong. The rich, however, tend to give to different causes than everyday Americans. Data from the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy show that households making \$140,000 or more in current dollars donate only 30 percent of their charity to causes connected to religion—while other Americans channel 60 percent in that direction. If giving by moderate-income households continues to fade and donations by the wealthy become more dominant in the future, expect a bigger flow of philanthropy to colleges and art galleries, and less to charities motivated by religious concern for the least and the lost. (*See graph 20*)

It's clear that America's unusual religiosity and extraordinary generosity are closely linked. As faith spirals downward, voluntary giving is very likely to follow. An obvious question for philanthropists is whether the causation arrow can be reversed.

Might there be ways that savvy donors could reinforce religious practice, yielding a range of pro-social results including more charitable generosity? We gave that question serious thought and came up with some practical proposals for philanthropists interested in rebuilding faith and generosity in tandem. For some rays of hope on this somewhat gloomy subject, turn to "Ways Philanthropy Can Reinforce Faith and Its Good Works" in the Ideas section of this magazine.

16. Beds for the Homeless provided by faith-based organizations



Source: Survey of 11 major cities, Assessing the Faith-based Response to Homelessness in America, 2017

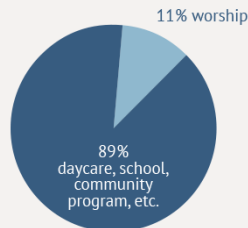
17. Density of Outlets



Source: 2017 data from Starbucks and The Socio-economic Contribution of Religion to American Society, Brian Grim and Melissa Grim, 2016

18. Social Uses of Houses of Worship

all visits made to churches and synagogues, by purpose



Source: Economic Halo Effect of Historic Sacred Places, Partners for Sacred Places, 2016

19. Today's Giving Decline

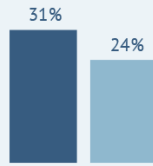
households donating to charity



Source: Lilly School of Philanthropy

19. Today's Giving Decline *cont.*

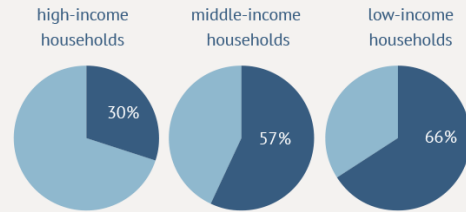
taxpayers reporting
charitable gifts



Source: Chronicle of Philanthropy

20. Portion of All Giving to Religious Causes

by income



Source: Boston College Center on Wealth and Philanthropy, 2003 data