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Farewell to Faith: Democracy, the Decline in American Public Religion, and the Rise of the Non-Religious

G. Doug Davis 

Department of Political Science, Troy University, Troy, AL 36082, USA; gddavis@troy.edu

Abstract: The United States national identity is changing as the non-religious population is growing and fewer Americans follow traditional Christian faiths. When Alexis De Tocqueville visited the United States, he found that the national government gained legitimacy and support from the popular national religion. This faith was nominally Christian but lacked any meaningful theological content. The national creed was a simple monotheism that was supported through the public's integration of a Cartesian methodology. This national religion was critical in providing the foundation for American economic growth and identity. Today, fewer Americans identify as Christians than at any point in its history, and more citizens have no religious preference or creed. The dominant religious culture is changing, and to understand the United States future, it is important to identify the political preferences of the non-religious population. This paper looks at the most recent Cooperative Election Survey and assesses the non-religious population's political participation and its aggregate support for U.S. military aid to Ukraine. The data show that the non-religious population is less politically active and more opposed to military aid to Kyiv. United States is becoming more secular. The division between the traditional religious and the growing secular populations is generating a cultural conflict—one that has a fundamental consequence for the American national identity.

Keywords: decline in religion in America; American popular religion; nones; secularization; Herberg; Tocqueville; religion and U.S. foreign policy



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1. Introduction

The United States is experiencing a cultural change where the popular religion, which existed from the country's founding, is slowly disappearing. The vast majority of its citizens embraced a national faith that was nominally Christian but in practice was only a popular monotheist creed. The same majority simultaneously supported a secular-liberal democracy. The popular religion provided social benefits recognized by both the political left and right who worked to preserve and promote it. There was no contradiction between the secular government and the popular religion, and it helped immigrants assimilate into American culture. Surveys conducted across the post-World War II era consistently reported that the majority of Americans identified as Christian. Recent surveys show a surprising trend as younger generations are less religious and more likely to have no religious identity or preference. The dominant political culture is changing as fewer Americans support the popular religion. The long-held religious culture, which was guided by a Cartesian methodology, is no longer present, and the United States is becoming more secular. The division between the traditional religious and the growing secular populations is generating a cultural conflict—one that has a fundamental consequence for the national identity.

Since the country's foundation, the United States public has embraced a nominally Christian public faith that legitimizes and sustains its secular, democratic government. The popular religion brings social benefits that work to stabilize and strengthen American society, economy, and governance. There is a symbiotic relationship between the national religion and national prowess, although it may appear to be a contradiction to outsiders.

Surveys¹ consistently show that the majority of Americans identify as Christian, and this has been true throughout our national history. The popular religion affirms a simple monotheism but is theologically shallow and intentionally ambiguous so as to include as many people as possible. This belief has served the country by facilitating integration and creating social solidarity. It has been the background of American democracy from the country's origin and has facilitated market expansion and legitimized the national government.

The long-term public religion is less present today as the United States is experiencing a cultural transformation and identity crisis. Recent surveys show a rise in citizens with no religious affiliation or preference and this group, mostly consisting of young adults, no longer accepts the popular creed. Historically, the Republicans and Democrats have both accepted and sought to preserve the national belief, but today, there is no longer bi-partisan support. The American population has become less religious, and this change impacts the national identity. While the United States no longer has a dominant national religion, it is not clear what will replace it.

The American democratic experience was rooted in a popular religious culture that provided an identity and norms to the nation. The public was connected to the country and its government through its intellectual consent to this world view. Leaders from both conservative and liberal parties would use religious language to reinforce this image and employ it to build support for their partisan platforms. National surveys consistently show the American public sees itself as a Christian society, but this only tells part of the story. The evidence suggests that the U.S. public sees itself as Christian, but when this belief is examined theologically, it is superficial and lacks depth. American sociologist [Robert Bellah \(1967\)](#) observes that the U.S. has a national faith and most Americans identify as Christian, but the content is vague and actually contradicts the religion it claims to follow. Bellah shows the national religion is not Protestant or Catholic, but instead, it holds an abstract monotheistic belief in a creator God. Throughout America's history, surveys and other studies have shown that most citizens hold a theoretical and speculative faith in God but have an uncertain Christology; nevertheless, they claim membership in a mainline Protestant or Catholic church. Bellah argues that this national religion expresses a minimal belief in a God but is crucial socially because it provides the public with a national identity. Religious self-understanding was essential to helping unify populations coming from different ethnic backgrounds and to provide legitimacy to the national and local governments. [Sidney Ahlstrom \(1972\)](#) agrees with Bellah that the United States has a popular religion and argues that the national civic religion is hollow and meaningless when examined carefully. It is simply that the U.S. public has a faith in faith. This allows the government to have liberal institutions and govern them with scientific reason, while using religion to unify the population. What impact does it have on the American democratic culture if the public faith changes or is lost?

2. American Religious Culture and Political Institutions

The dominant, historical American political culture appears to be a contradiction, because there is a national faith that works to support a secular government. The main challenge comes from the difficulty in understanding that the United States political project is both religious and secular; this makes it different from conventional European democratic states that are more non-religious and follow a secular-materialist logic. Religion remains

important in America, and a higher percentage of the population reports that they practice Christianity (Díaz de Rada and Gil-Gimeno 2023). The complex relationship between Christianity and secular–materialist institutions has been present from the country’s foundation (Aiello 2005). The United States constitutional framers recognized the nationalistic, American public Christianity as a prerequisite for American democracy. There was religious freedom in principle—when the Declaration of Independence was signed and propagated (Allen 2015)—but there were some key distinctions where people were treated differently due to their religious beliefs. For example, Thomas Jefferson stated that individuals would have the right to believe in one or twenty divinities, but he also maintained that atheists should not be allowed to give testimony in court (J. Campbell 2019). A decade later, when the central government considered a new governmental structure—one that would produce the federal government still in place today—the American public religion was securely established. When the U.S. Constitution was written at the national convention, the national faith was recognized as a vital characteristic. The Establishment Clause is part of the First Amendment, and it forbids the federal government from mandating or establishing a national religion and to not ratify laws that would favor one religion over another. This did not apply to the informal national popular religion that was present in the national culture that worked to legitimize the federal government but was outside Washington’s control. The constitutional framers recognized that the democratic institutions it established would only work for a religious people. Although the government would be secular, it needed the people to be morally formed to consent to the new national institutions. John Adams stated, “Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other”². The public religion was not theologically advanced, but its presence was significant for the formation of Washington’s democratic government.

The American public religion was maintained in the early years and provided the basis for sustaining the national culture and identity. When Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in the United States, he saw that the Puritan heritage impacted the national ethos and worked to advance federal democracy. De Tocqueville observed that democracy contains and produces negative elements that work to undermine its longevity. These elements include materialism, individualism, and tyranny of the majority. The French scholar maintained that American religious faith works to correct these negative tendencies that would otherwise weaken and eventually destroy the political system. The traditional American religious culture is vital as it provides a means to mitigate negative influences without requiring the central government to intervene. De Tocqueville argues that preserving the public religion is one of most crucial tasks for its leaders. He writes, “I am so convinced that one must maintain Christianity with the new democracies at all cost [p. 521]”. According to him, the American religion is the first political institution, and it preserves American democracy by overcoming the individualist tendencies that could otherwise threaten its liberal government.

The American national religion was also critical to Washington by helping to foster economic and military expansion. This allowed the federal government to conquer new lands, assimilate them, and consolidate control over the territory. Paul Johnson (1998) offers a noteworthy chronicle in *A History of the American People* where he shows that the U.S. public religion was vital to transforming the United States from a backwoods country into the most powerful state globally. He shows that popular religion was dominant across the country, and while not enforced by Washington, it proved critical in developing social cohesion and providing the motivation for individuals to personally build successful farms and enterprises that would foster market development and expansion³. This national characteristic continued to facilitate national unity as Washington grew to become the dominant economic power globally in the twentieth century. The public religion was

critical in developing social cohesion and providing the motivation to act personally to economically develop the country, and this helped the United States advance from a backward group of colonies into the world's most powerful country.

The United States was the leading democratic power globally following the Second World War and found itself in a global struggle against the Soviet Union for control of the international system. The national religion helped Washington fight international communism and was a national tool that made the United States more easily resist the threatening atheistic ideology. American leaders promoted and used the national religion as an instrument to fight the Soviets. National opinion polls conducted in the 1950s showed that over 90% of Americans publicly identified as a Christian. When communism was the dominant foreign threat to the United States, one way to display one's patriotism was by going to church. This was recognized by American presidents who worked to maintain and promote the national religious ethos through their symbolic behavior. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who served at this time, recognized the chief executive had the broader duties to the country that were not outlined in the Constitution, one of which was to affirm the national faith (Fairbanks 1982). Eisenhower had no theology and instinctively recognized that the public religion was important to American national policy (Eisenhower 1963). He publicly attended religious services as an example to the country (Lyons 1974) and sought to preserve American civil religion. This did not violate American law or the Constitution because he worked to uphold and defend the religion of the state rather than establish a state religion. In order to preserve unity, Eisenhower's religious pronouncements were shallow platitudes. This was symbolic to maintain the public religion, and Eisenhower did not follow Christian principles in his governmental service. He was a pragmatic realist and used his public support to build domestic unity and fight atheistic communism. The executive branch was not alone in advocating the public religion as the legislature and courts also used their influence to co-promote the national faith.

The legislative and judicial branches also made statements affirming the national religious faith, although these declarations do not change the secular, materialist reason employed by leaders and bureaucrats. For example, the American judiciary issues statements supporting the popular national religious identity within decisions rendered by the U.S. Supreme Court. Justice William Douglas' majority opinion in the 1952 case *Zorach v. Clauson* states, "We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being (House Committee 1964, p. 1140)". Justice Thomas Campbell Clark wrote the 1963 majority opinion, stating, "The fact that the Founding Fathers believed devotedly that there was a God and that the inalienable rights of men were rooted in Him is clearly evidenced in their writings, from the Mayflower Compact to the Constitution itself (House Committee 1964, p. 891)". The Court used the popular national religious ethos as background statement in a majority opinion, but these statements were not decisive in deciding either case. While the Supreme Court made statements that appear to violate the separation of church and state, it has never used religious reasoning to decide a case, and if it did so, the American public would not recognize it as legitimate. In looking at the court's history, the individual justices' religion is less important than their legal philosophy, which guides their approach to deciding cases (Golding 1963; Hammond et al. 2005). While the national court made statements supporting the popular religion, it did not function within the legal analysis used to settle constitutional issues. The decisions worked to uphold the national faith without changing the government's secular orientation.

There is a broad, historic support for America's public religion. The popular belief system was never erected by the government, but it was used by Washington to maintain a national culture that sustained liberal democracy. The federal government, through its leaders, recognized its reliance on the popular creed and countless politicians have officially

recognized and advocated its continued existence. This religious ethos works to build public unity, governmental legitimacy, and public consent to follow national policies. It has not stopped the federal government from administrating the state in a liberal, anti-religious manner. The national creed supports the bureaucracy and governmental culture, but the religious position does not itself have legitimacy to enter into the discourse. In other words, the public religion works to support specific social, political, and economic functions (Ellwood 1918) but it does thereby legitimize itself to enter the governmental discourse. The national belief system has been in place for hundreds of years and has played a vital supporting role in American democracy. As the national creed changes as more people identify as non-religious, this can have important consequences for democracy. If de Tocqueville is correct, democracy produces negative outcomes, such as individualism, materialism, and consumerism that religion mitigates. As the secular or non-religious population grows, the American democratic system will no longer be able to rely on the national faith and will have to find other measures to address the negative elements de Tocqueville identified.

3. Herberg: America's Concurrent Religiosity and Secularity

Survey research provides insights into assessing aggregate perceptions but can be misleading when one confuses what respondents state with what they understand. Americans express a personal belief in God, and many identify as a Christian, but the religious experience is limited to individual judgements and does not extend to social, political, or economic relationships. The United States' main institutions are governed through the principles of secular, materialist logic. Popular religious piety does not participate in public discourse and is not a factor in the public ethos, which is inherently non-religious or anti-religious. How can this contradiction function within American life?

Religion has an important place within American culture where it functions as a social religion that guides individual morality and reinforces broad support for the government and the national way-of-life. Will Herberg (1983)⁴ provides a sociological perspective into national religious practices in his *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. Herberg tried to explain how Americans could see themselves as religious—affirming God's existence and that the Bible is divinely authored while living a practical secular, materialist personal life (Marty 2005)⁵. Religious practices exist concurrently with materialism, consumerism, and secularism.

Herberg opens his work noting a contradiction: most Americans report being Christian and believe that the Bible is the "revealed word of God", but more than half of the population could not name a single book in the Bible [p. 2]. Most survey respondents who claimed to be Christian did not have their religious faith impact their daily life, which was otherwise guided by secular materialism. There is an inconsistency in that many new churches are being built at the same time that modern secularism is growing. Herberg observes, "The secularism dominating the American consciousness is not an overt philosophy; it is an underlying, often unconscious, orientation of life and thought [p. 1]", and although it is 'pervasive and omnipresent', it is missed by observers. Ironically, "America seems to be at once the most religious and the most secular of nations [p. 3]". Herberg shows how American public religion served a sociological function that provided stability and unity. Christianity was not valued for its unique religious claims but was employed to build support for the secular political and economic order.

Herberg considers American religious culture in the post-World War II world, but the national character he describes originated in the earliest days of the republic. The United States majority population emerged through immigration and the new arrivals needed to be reliably and consistently assimilated into a secular, liberal state. New settlers

were expected to integrate into American popular culture, but as Herberg argues, they were not expected to give up their religious identity [p. 27]. In chapter four, he states that new migrants could more easily adapt and contribute to the American economy if they could maintain some tie to their homeland. Religious practice provided this link and allowed immigrants arriving in the United States to accept American secular values while maintaining their identity by attending religious services with peers who shared their ethnic heritage. As a result, American churches adopted a non-religious role that reinforced national ideals, provided an identity, and avoided addressing Christianity's fundamental properties and contemporary theological issues. Religion was important as "a primary symbol of 'heritage,' and church membership the most appropriate form of 'belonging' under contemporary American conditions [p. 57]". The national public religion was a tool used to shape a national identity that created unity in a varied European immigrant population.

The United States never had a national church, but this did not stop it from forming a national religious identity that was adopted by Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Herberg notes that the "basic unity of American religion is rooted in the underlying presuppositions, values and ideals that together constitute the American Way of Life on its 'spiritual' side. It is the American Way of Life that is the shared possession of All Americans and that defines the American's convictions on those matters that count most [p. 231]". The Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religions all stand for the same values and ideas, and this popular religion defends democracy, capitalism, and the American dream of social advancement through work (Kazal 1995). Almost all Americans belonged to one of these three religious groups when Herberg published his work, and he shows that this created a popular consensus for what it means to be an American. Herberg notes the three main religious groups all became "expressions of an over-all American religion, standing for essentially the same 'moral ideals' and spiritual values [p. 87]". There was a unifying ideology that created a popular consensus for what it meant to be an American. Since religion preserves the social order, Herberg shows that it is practically atheistic as it is not able to address cultural life beyond individual morality⁶. Herberg was scandalized by religion's reduction to a sociological purpose, one that excluded ultimate questions about reality that are traditionally addressed within a religion (Gaston 2013)⁷. The American religious ethos allowed the U.S. to establish an identity and provided legitimacy to the government, but the conditions that made this popular religion endure may be ending.

4. Religious Survey: A New Era in American Faith

The U.S. public has consistently identified itself as Christian in national surveys throughout the post-World War II era. These studies unfailingly report that American public religion is an essential element in its national culture (R. M. Williams 1957). Today, the United States is changing as fewer citizens follow mainline Christian churches while the population claiming no religion is quickly expanding (Davis et al. 2023). Surveys have examined American religious beliefs from World War II until today and provide a long-term perspective that reveals interesting changes. Early surveys show that Americans reported that religion was important in their lives and to the national identity in the 1940s and 1950s and church membership was high. In the following decades, the overall population identifying as Christian was high but slowly declining. Church membership has dropped at an unprecedented rate beginning around 2010, and the fastest growing demographic group today is Americans with no religious preference. There are four major surveys assessing American religious self-understanding, and all report that Christianity is declining while the non-religious population is growing. The two most prominent surveys are conducted by Gallup and the Pew Research Center, but there is important research carried out in the

ARIS survey and the General Social Survey. The empirical results are robust and consistent. Each study independently reports the same findings: Christianity is declining while the non-religious population is growing.

The Gallup poll provides the longest historical perspective as it began conducting religious surveys in the 1940s and continues to carry out this research. It may be the most significant aggregate religious research in the United States, and its most recent survey (2024) reports that 68% of the U.S. public identify as either Protestant, Evangelical, or Catholic Christians⁸. This number may appear high when compared to other Western states, but it is lower than at any time in the post-World War II era. This survey also shows that 22% of Americans have no religion, which is also an all-time high for the United States. To properly understand how the American religion is different today, one can look at the past, specifically the 1948 Gallup survey, which reported that, nationally, 91% of the population identified as Christian. This actually grew and peaked at 96% in 1956 as the Cold War grew in intensity and the public worried about communist influences. In the next decade, more than 90% of Americans continued to identify as Christian. The first time the aggregate percentage of American Christians fell below 90% was 1972. The American majority continued to identify as Christian, but its overall level began to decline and fell below 80% in 2009. The decline accelerated, and the aggregate total fell below 70% in 2019. In 2023, the last year where data are available, 68% of the American public identified as Christian. The Gallup survey shows that, from World War II until today, a smaller percentage of the American public identifies as Christian.

The Gallup survey also assessed and reported data for Americans who have no religious preference. When the surveys began in 1948, this population was at a minimal level and constituted approximately 2% of the U.S. public. It remained at or below this level until 1968, when it reached 3%, after which point it began to rise more quickly. A noteworthy threshold was reached in 2002, when 10% of the American public identified as non-religious. This population continued to grow and reached 15% in 2015. The most recent survey was conducted in 2023 and reports the non-religious population at 22%, which is an all-time high. If this trend continues, the Americans who have no religious identity will continue to grow. While the numbers may appear low, the ratio of aggregate non-religious population to Christians changed from 1 in 30 to more than 1 in 5 in four decades, which is a significant transformation. The non-religious population continues to constitute a minority, but its recent growth is changing the American political culture.

When organizations survey the same population over decades, it is possible to add questions to provide perspective on aggregate tendencies. The Gallup surveys are valuable because they continue to offer their original questions and have added additional questions to better understand the role religion plays for the respondent. In 1965, questions were introduced to assess if religion was important to the respondent's individual life. At this time, 70% responded positively to this question, but this number decreased to 52% in 1978. It recovered to 60% in 1980 and remained at this level until 2005 and has since been in decline. It fell below 50% for the first time in 2019 and was at 45% in 2023, the last year with reported data. The [Gallup \(2024\)](#) report shows that attendance at weekly religious services increased from 41% of the public in 1939 to 49% in 1954, but it dropped to 40% in the 1970s and remained at this level until 2013, when it began to decline significantly. It fell to 29% of Americans in 2021. When one looks at the Gallup surveys, most Americans report that they identify as a Christian, but these numbers are lower than at any time since World War II.

The Pew Research Center provides noteworthy historical survey research, although over a shorter time period, and it reports identical tendencies. Its surveys show individuals who self-identify as Christian decreased from 78% of the population in 2007 to 63% in 2021 ([G. Smith 2021](#)). The individuals who report no religious identity increased from

16% to 29% over the same timeframe⁹. The ratio of Christians to non-religious individuals decreased from five-to-one in 2007 to two-to-one in 2021. The drop was most significant within Protestant denominations, which fell from 52% of the U.S. population to 40% over this time, but the Catholic population has likewise decreased from 24% to 21%. The Pew Research Center asks questions regarding respondent's prayer habits, and in 2007, 58% reported they prayed daily, a number that fell to 45% in 2021 (G. Smith 2021). The Pew Research Center survey coincides with the Gallup report to show that a smaller percentage of Americans identify as Christian.

While the number of Americans having no religious preference is growing, atheism remains relatively rare in U.S. society. The Pew Research Center reports that Americans who identify as atheists have grown from 2% in 2007 to 3% in 2014 and increased only to 4% in the 2023 survey (Cooperman et al. 2015; Lipka et al. 2024). The Pew Research Center also reports the American atheist populations' predominant demographic features. U.S. atheists are mostly Caucasian, relatively young (under 49 years old), and strongly adhere to the Democratic Party (Lipka et al. 2024). Compared to Europe, atheism is relatively rare in American society¹⁰ (Koranda 2017). While atheism exists in the United States, it is less common and smaller than groups identifying as non-religious.

The Gallup and Pew Research surveys are the most important source within the United States, but there are three research institutes that provide additional data. The General Social Survey had asked U.S. citizens what they believe about God in 1988, and for decades, the response was consistent, with 70% of the silent generation and about 63% of baby boomers and Generation X respondents indicating that they had certainty that God exists (T. W. Smith 2019; Smith et al. 2019). In 2018, the Millennial Generation was less confident, with only 44% stating personal certainty in God's existence. This fell further with Generation Z, reporting only 33% of the population as having this certainty (T. W. Smith 2019). Not surprisingly, when one looks at the opinion data, one finds that 40% of young people have no religious affiliation and less than a quarter go to weekly religious services (T. W. Smith 2019; R. Burge 2021; R. P. Burge 2023). The General Social Survey (GSS) provides the second dataset on religious data that confirms the Gallup and Pew Research survey findings. The 2014 GSS found a significant increase in the percentage of Americans who reported no religious affiliation. The GSS found that 5% of Americans reported no religious affiliation in 1972 when its survey was first conducted. This population grew to 8% in 1990 and increased again to 21% in 2014. While the aggregate numbers are different within the four surveys, they all show the same tendency. Another study was carried out by Kosmin and Keysar (2009), called the ARIS survey, and it found that there were approximately 14.3 million Americans with no religious affiliation in 1990, a number that grew to 34.1 million in 2008. This was a 138% increase, which constituted 37% of the overall population. While the overall percentage of Americans who have no religious affiliation is rising, this change is mostly affecting the younger generations, and this will have a significant impact on the United States' cultural and political future.

Do most Americans see the United States as a Christian country today? There are three main responses to this question: (i) the U.S. is a Christian country; (ii) the United States is not a Christian country today but was in the past; and (iii) the U.S. never was a Christian country. Survey data show that the largest group, constituting 42% of the population, believe that the United States was a Christian country in the past but is no longer so today. The next largest group (37%) believes that the country remains a Christian state, and 19% state that the U.S. was never a Christian country (Cox 2020). One interesting anomaly is the survey respondents who identify as Christians as they believe that the U.S. is no longer a Christian country, while those who hold another religion state that, in their opinion, the U.S. is a Christian country (Cox 2020). It is significant that those who self-report as Christian no

longer see the country as Christian; this signals a consequential change in the national faith. Religion's place within American society is different today, and it is noteworthy that while Christians constitute a numerical majority, survey results suggest that their religious belief has less influence on public affairs and that the U.S. is culturally a post-Christian society.

5. Demographic and Political Character of the Change

The non-religious population is not evenly distributed across the U.S. but is concentrated in particular groups; the younger generations have experienced the greatest transformation. Older Americans are consistent in their religious identity and their survey responses have not changed over the past decades. The variations in survey results are driven by younger generations, where many have left their family's religious heritage and now identify as non-religious. The [PRRI \(2023\)](#) survey shows that young adults between 18 and 29 years old have become less religious and are most likely to identify as non-religious. Recent surveys report that the percentage of young adults with no religious affiliation doubled from 10% in 1986 to 20% in 1996. It continued to increase, but at a slower rate, as it reached 23% in 2006. It then rose rapidly and reached historic highs in 2022, the last year with available data, when 38% of young adults indicated that they had no religious faith. The PRRI report also showed significant differences in religious affiliation between conservatives and liberals. The most recent survey shows that one-third of Democrats and only 12% of Republicans have no religious identity ([PRRI 2024](#)). In the 2024 U.S. presidential election, one in three Democrats (33%) stated that they have no religious affiliation, which is an increase from 12% in 2024. The non-religious Republicans increased much more slowly and grew from 10% in 2012 to 12% in 2024. The overall aggregate numbers assigning U.S. religious identity vary according to the number of Democrats or Republicans included in the survey ([R. P. Burge 2020](#)). While the young and politically left population has a weaker religious identity over time, there are even more profound changes when one looks at sex.

The post-World War II era has consistently found that more men leave their traditional religion than women, and this has been constant in every previous generation ([Baker and Whitehead 2016](#)). The contemporary cultural transformation has yielded unexpected results in that today more young women are non-religious and have abandoned their religious heritage than men. There is anecdotal ([Graham 2024](#)) and empirical evidence ([Cox and Hammond 2024](#)) showing how men and women respond differently to traditional religious beliefs today. The survey provides some context and shows that 65% of Generation Z women believe that Christian churches treat men and women unequally ([Cox and Hammond 2024](#)). The young adults who leave their religious faith report that, in most cases, it was not one cause but multiple issues; religious treatment of gay and lesbian people was significant in their decision ([Cox and Hammond 2024](#)). Another unusual characteristic is that 78% of those with no religious preference engage in or hold some new age beliefs ([Gecewica 2018](#)); while they do not subscribe to a conventional religious belief, this does not mean that they do practice any religion. [Eberstadt \(2013\)](#) finds that the secular population emerged through the destruction of traditional families. The latest Gallup poll shows that 28.5% of Generation Z women, who were between 18 and 26 years old when the survey was administered, identify as non-heterosexual, while for men, the number is 10.6% ([Jones 2024](#)). Surprisingly, the religion survey shows that men are more likely to want to become parents and start a family than women ([Cox and Hammond 2024](#)). The survey data showing the growth in non-religious American population is driven by changes in the younger generation, and this will manifest itself in unforeseen ways in the future.

6. The Non-Religious in the Cooperative Election Survey: Participation and Support for the Ukraine War

National surveys offer an important insight into the demographic composition and individual perspectives of the country's population and are important for understanding contemporary democracies. The Cooperative Election Survey (CES) (formally known as the Congressional Elective Survey) is a nationally representative survey administrated by YouGov, a public opinion and data firm (Schaffner et al. 2023). The survey data were collected before and after the 2024 American election. The survey includes 60,000 respondents that are randomly selected across the United States. One particular strength is the large sample size of individuals who identify as non-religious as it included 13,572 individuals in the survey. The survey is comprehensive as it contains religious questions which were formerly included in previous Pew surveys, and encompasses demographic, income, ideological, and political and social belief measurements. Policy makers and academics can use this data as a means to understand social changes that affect American democracy. The Cooperative Election Survey is the most representative and reliable survey instrument assessing the American public.

Previous surveys show that individuals who report no religious identity have distinct political preferences, and since their demographic presence is growing, it is important to understand how they approach contemporary political life. This empirical section will assess two questions: are non-religious Americans less politically engaged than the broader public? It is important to look at one contemporary issue and assess how the growth in this population impacts U.S. foreign policy. The 2024 survey asks respondents if they support U.S. military aid or support to Ukraine. The second hypothesis assesses how the non-religious individuals aggregately support the U.S. military aid to Ukraine. If the literature is correct, non-religious Americans would be less likely to support providing Ukraine with weapons or other military support. While the non-religious public has been identified in previous surveys as having large support for the democratic party and the Biden–Harris team sought to preserve U.S. aid for Kyiv, it would be surprising that an important democratic constituency would have views at odds with their leadership.

The survey asks participants to state their religious affiliation and offers several categories for respondents to select. The possible choices include Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Eastern or Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist, Agnostic, Nothing in Particular, and Something Else. The main causal variable is Religious Nones, and it is a “1” for individuals who choose this option and a “0” for all other choices. We also control for Christianity and create a variable that includes all respondents who are Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox. The Agnostic and Atheist variable represent only those who select this option for their religious identity.

The main theoretical question is whether survey data show that the American population with no religious preference are less politically engaged—as previous surveys indicate—and whether they are less likely to support American military aid for Ukraine. The CES asks respondents whether they have participated in political activity in the past year. The possible activities include attending a local political meeting; putting up a political sign; working for a candidate or campaign; attending a march, protest, or demonstration; contacting a public official; or donating money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization. This variable was coded a ‘1’ if a respondent indicated that they have performed any of these tasks in the past year and ‘0’ if the respondent has not engaged in any of these activities. Overall, approximately 34% of Americans have engaged in political participation in the past year.

The second main dependent variable assesses whether the respondent supports any form of U.S. military aid to Ukraine. The survey asked, “What do you think the United

States should do in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine?” Military Support for Ukraine is a categorical variable coded “1” if respondents respond to the question with (iv) provide arms to Ukraine; (v) enforce a no-fly zone; (vi) use drones and air craft to bomb Russian troops; (vii) send military support staff (non-combat); or (viii) send significant force to fight Russia. This variable was coded a “1” if the respondent answered yes to any of these options and “0” if each response was a no. The overall survey shows that approximately half the U.S. population supports military aid to Ukraine.

Results

The non-religious population is less politically active than other Americans and is approximately nine percent less likely to have engaged in intentional interactions with governmental officials in the past year (see Table 1). While around 34% of Americans have been politically active in the past year, this measurement is around 24% for the non-religious population. The raw numbers show that approximately 3400 of the more than 13,000 non-religious individuals included in the survey are politically active (see Table 2). There are some interesting findings in the CES showing that Christians and non-Christians are not distinguishable from the national mean. Atheists, at approximately 47%, and agnostics, at 43%, are the most politically active religious groups (see Table 1). The non-religious, atheists, and agnostics all reject organized religion but have different levels of engagement in the political system.

Table 1. Political activity based on religion. Respondents report if they have attended a local political meeting; put up a political sign; worked for a candidate or campaign; attended a march, protest, or demonstration; contacted a public official; or donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization.

Population	Mean	Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval	Observations
All	34.4%	0.0019	34.0% to 34.8%	60,000
No Religion	25.2%	0.0037	24.4% to 25.9%	13,572
Identified Religion	37.1%	0.0022	36.6% to 37.5%	46,428
Christian	34.6%	0.0027	34.1% to 35.1%	29,852
Non-Christian	34.2%	0.0027	33.6% to 34.7%	30,148
Agnostic	43.1%	0.0076	41.6% to 44.5%	4232
Atheist	47.3%	0.0075	45.9% to 48.8%	4428

Table 2. Two-by-two table (and Chi Square) assessing non-religious survey respondents and political activity.

	Not Politically Active	Politically Active	Total
No Religious Identity	10,153	3419	13,572
Identified Religion	29,212	17,216	46,428
Total	39,365	20,635	60,000

Pearson Chi²: 657.9 ($p = 0.000$).

The American non-religious population is different in its aggregate support for U.S. military assistance to Ukraine. While approximately half of the U.S. public wants the government to provide some form of military help to Kyiv, only 42% of the non-religious public supports this effort (see Table 3). Approximately 5700 of the 13,500 non-religious individuals support assisting Ukraine’s armed forces (see Table 4). The largest religious communities supporting this are atheists (at 71%) and agnostics (64.7%) The Christian population and non-Christian religious Americans are not significantly different from the overall U.S. population (see Table 3). This is an important finding because while the non-

religious population tends to support the Democratic Party, its policy preferences toward Ukraine are different from its political leadership.

Table 3. Support for U.S. military aid or intervention to help Ukraine based on religion. Respondents report support for sending arms to Ukraine, enforcing a no-fly zone, using drones and/or aircraft to attack Russian troops, sending military support staff to Ukraine, and sending significant military personnel to fight Russia.

Population	Mean	Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval	Observations
All	50.75%	0.0020	50.3% to 51.1%	60,000
No Religion	42.0%	0.0042	41.2% to 42.9%	13,572
Identified Religion	53.3%	0.0023	52.8% to 53.7%	46,428
Christian	48.85%	0.0029	49.3% to 50.5%	29,852
Non-Christian	51.5%	0.0029	51.0% to 52.2%	30,148
Agnostic	64.7%	0.0073	63.2% to 66.1%	4232
Atheist	71.4%	0.0068	70.1% to 72.8%	4428

Table 4. Two-by-two table (and Chi Square) assessing non-religious survey respondents and support for U.S. military aid to Ukraine.

	No Military Support	Military Support	Total
No Religious Identity	7865	5707	13,572
Identified Religion	21,685	24,743	46,428
Total	29,550	30,450	60,000

Pearson χ^2 : 531.16 ($p = 0.000$).

7. American Democracy and the Loss of the National Faith

The United States has witnessed a growth in its non-religious population and a decline in the percentage of the population that holds the national faith¹¹. In the 1950s, when the national religion was thriving, half of the U.S. population was a member of a mainline Protestant denomination, but this has fallen to 10% today (R. P. Burge 2023; Andersen 2020; Plante 2024). The popular belief has existed since the country's founding but today is no longer present at the same level. One key sign came during the 2009 presidential inauguration when Obama became the first U.S. president to recognize non-religious people in a major speech when he stated that the country is “a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers (Obama 2009, p. 10)”¹². This occurred when the non-religious population was around half of its present level but already constituted a significant bloc for the Democratic Party's electoral success. While this remark received little attention, it is a sign that the American public religion is evolving: non-religious population is gaining prominence, and the national faith is declining.

As the dominant religious narrative slowly deteriorates, it will have an impact on the national social and political culture. There is an intimate relationship between religion and social solidarity (Berger 1967), and having a dominant social faith, even if shallow, increases the support for tolerance, trust, and freedom (Marshall and Olson 2018; Possenti 1991). In the time it takes to publish this article, the overall percentage of non-religious Americans is likely to change and, if current trends hold, will further increase and make a greater impact on American society. Stinespring and Cragun (2015) estimate that, by 2042, somewhere between 26% and 47% of U.S. adults will have no religious preference at all. This estimate was based on historic data from 1993 to 2012 and may be low given that, by 2021, the non-religious population had already reached 29% of the population (G. Smith 2021). R. P. Burge (2023) notes that the quickly growing non-religious population appears to be leveling off and is around the same percentage for those aged 25 to 40. The

non-religious population has increased rapidly, but its growth has slowed in recent years. It is nevertheless large and constitutes a major presence within the American culture.

The non-religious population is a significant potential voting bloc and can play a major role in national elections. National surveys show that the American non-religious population has different political opinions and preferences than atheists or agnostics (McCaffree 2017; Park et al. 2024). The empirical model in this paper shows that the non-religious population is less politically active and does not support U.S. foreign military aid to Ukraine. The individuals willing to publicly identify as atheists are Caucasian¹³, well-educated, and wealthy compared to the overall American population (McCaffree 2017). Surveys show that the American non-religious population is significantly different from traditional atheists. While atheists are better educated and have higher incomes than the average American, the non-religious population is more like the typical American in terms of wealth and schooling (Drescher 2016). Atheists and religious believers have higher educational achievement than the non-religious (Horwitz 2021; C. Smith 1998), and education positively impacts religious participation (Schwadel 2011). Survey research shows that the non-religious population is apathetic about the important questions and have stopped trying to find a deeper meaning for their lives, including through politics (McCaffree 2017). The non-religious population is politically fragmented and diverse (Schwadel 2020), and while they are aggregately significant, lower participation will limit their ability to impact national politics (R. P. Burge 2023). The non-religious voters are demographically as numerous as Catholics or evangelicals and approaching the number of mainline Protestants.¹⁴ The growth in the non-religious population illustrates the religious transformation present in American society (McCaffree et al. 2023). It indicates the national popular religious consensus is less present and this constitutes a consequential change in American public life.

The historic transformation can aggravate the cultural division present within the United States as the secular and religious populations' different worldviews render it increasingly difficult to settle differences through discourse¹⁵. Federal elections become more critical to the national identity because there is a real distinction between the traditionally religious population and the growing non-religious cohort. Philosophic and religious differences now constitute a major political division where America was more united in the past.

The non-religious U.S. population is growing, and its expansion is slowly transforming the national social and cultural identity. As more Americans identify as non-religious or atheistic, the political right and left have come to embrace contrary positions on the role faith plays in society (Foer 2003; Campbell et al. 2020). National polls show that individual who identify as having no religious preference tend to support the Democratic Party (Zuckerman et al. 2016)¹⁶; they also have clear preferences in favor of abortion, euthanasia, military passivity, LGBTQ rights, and cosmopolitanism and are less likely to support American foreign military operations than other Americans (Zuckerman et al. 2016). Their political competency is growing as internet communities and secular voters are becoming more organized and active (Zuckerman et al. 2016; Schwadel 2020; Taira 2023). When America was growing as nation and striving to become strong globally, there was a strong national religion¹⁷. When the American public had a dominant faith, both parties advocated their religious belief to display patriotism and to provide legitimacy for their platforms. Today, there is an unprecedented situation where Republican majorities identify with a traditional Judeo-Christian ethos while somewhere between a third and a half of the democratic supporters are secular and non-religious. Ultimately, the United States will be weaker in its foreign commitments because this cultural division will translate into an inability to make credible long-term promises on the part of American leaders as foreign policy and relationships will change when the opposition party comes to power.

The division weakens American leadership (Davis and Slobodchikoff 2024) and creates vulnerabilities that its adversaries can exploit. The United States is experiencing a cultural change that will decide the dominant cultural identity.

Until recent times, American popular culture has always been religious, while the government had remained secular. The national religion created a culture where immigrants and minority populations were assimilated in order to facilitate mutually beneficial economic and social relationships (Lentis 2017). This created a basis for social solidarity and toleration, which, in turn, provided the background for the secular government to function. There was an implicit recognition that one's political opponents still sought to pursue the national interest and it was possible to solve political stalemates with mutually beneficial compromises. Today, the American public religion is changing, and this will impact the national culture. Eliot ([1948] 1962) observed that "it will be agreed that the formation of a religion is also the formation of a culture [p. 73]" and that, when religion changes, new cultures will be propagated¹⁸. If Eliot is correct, then American political culture will change. The way Americans understand, interact with, and legitimize the government will be different as the national culture evolves.

Today, most Americans publicly identify as Christian, but the national culture no longer reflects the majority religion. The United States has followed Europe and is now a post-Christian country (Meacham 2009; Dreher 2018; Vahanian 2009). When de Tocqueville began the second part of *Democracy in America*, he wrote about the public philosophy within the United States, saying that everyone is Cartesian although no one has read Descartes. The American public, de Tocqueville noted, pays less attention to philosophy than any other people, but they all follow the same method for their intellectual inquiries. This also explains why U.S. majorities identify as Christian although they follow a secular model. Americans use Cartesian logic to guide their religious understanding. The Cartesian worldview is an essential prerequisite for American democracy: it provided John Locke with a general knowledge method (Schouls 2018) and Locke's works proposed a governmental template used by the framers of the American Constitution. As long as the American public internalizes Cartesian methods, there is a continuity between the public philosophy and governmental institutions. When the traditionally religious public no longer believes the United States follows Christian principles, the foundation for American democracy, that is, the Cartesian culture, is no longer present¹⁹. If de Tocqueville is right, the American people are able to maintain their constitutional rights because Descartes' philosophic method was accepted and followed by the public. It is an open question whether the American public can preserve the Cartesian character as the religious composition changes.

The American public religion served to mitigate some negative elements such as individualism, consumerism, and materialism that emerge within democratic states (De Tocqueville 2002; Davis and Slobodchikoff 2019). The United States has always had a public faith in the divinity as a unifying factor, but this is no longer true, and it is important to assess the consequences of this shift. Although the country was changing slowly, there were signs in the 1992 presidential election that America was dividing politically and a culture war²⁰ was beginning (Fowler et al. 1999)²¹. The partisan division between Democrats and Republicans strengthened and became less flexible in religiously important issues—including abortion, gender, gay rights, and the role of religion in society (Carmines and Layman 1997; Davis and Robinson 1996; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Layman 1999). Surveys indicated that, by 1999, approximately 20% of American voters sought to curtail the political power of Christian fundamentalists (Bolce and De Maio 1999). Since then, society has become increasingly secular, and the non-religious population has grown to constitute an important voter bloc (Niose 2012; Zuckerman 2014). This transformation, in turn, will pose a challenge to the historic American government's informal reliance on religion identified

by Tocqueville and Herbert. In his book *The Crisis of Modernity* (Del Noce 2014), Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce notes that, as the presence of religion declines in society, the political divisions will gain importance. His work focuses on Italian post-war experiences and suggests that, when the non-religious population grows and society becomes more secular, a significant philosophical change will ensue: politics will fill the place previously held by religion, and the national culture will come to be dominated by a materialist, positivistic philosophy²². Del Noce notes that pragmatism and empiricism merge to produce scientism²³—the rule of objective, scientific knowledge and the consequent attempt to destroy traditional culture and previous political order²⁴. This results in a transition that leads to a governmental system run and managed by elites, who govern by defending their positions publicly marketing them as ‘science’. It no longer needs an ideological justification (Buttiglione 1991). While democratic governments will be less able to deliberate any meaningful policies, scientism will dominate²⁵. Ironically, as individual politicians will have less capability to pass meaningful legislation or change policy, the competition for political office will become more perilous. Del Noce points out that this change “represents the greatest expansion of power in conjunction with the greatest rejection of authority: we can recognize in it the outcome of the revolution as to the program of universal liberation [p. 205]”. Governmental power will grow, and the state authority will be more concentrated as the state is managed by elites²⁶.

As society becomes more secular (Sherkat 2014), selective censorship becomes common, and the actual freedom of speech declines. There have been some signs that the American government is no longer allowing the Constitution to limit its scope. George Carey (2001), an American constitutional scholar, wrote over two decades ago that no governmental branch under either major political party sees itself bound by the American Constitution. He argues that the philosophic principle to uphold the Constitution was destroyed and nothing has replaced it. In commenting on Carey’s work, James V. Schall notes, “The president issues ‘decrees’ at will, the courts invent ‘rights’, and the Congress goes along with them [p. 19]”. The Cartesian public philosophy that allowed the public to consent to and support democratic institutions is not present at the same level, and this has given politicians and bureaucrats freedom to violate constitutional limitations without facing consequences. While Carey looks at Clinton and his predecessors, this has continued to be a problem in all subsequent presidents’ use of executive orders (Gerhardt 2016; Mayer 2021; Cox and Rodríguez 2020), and it continues to be a problem in the early days of the second Trump administration (Liptak 2025).

The American secular government has historically followed the scientific method, consistent with the Cartesian method, but it recognized and valued religion’s contribution to society. This has changed, and religious citizens and groups have seen their social standing decline. Religiously based social organizations find themselves challenged by atheistic groups in courts and have had to stop providing services to the poor and destitute (Eberstadt 2016)²⁷. Cultural changes have removed people of faith from the public sphere and used scientism to eliminate arguments not based on logic and reason²⁸. The religious and cultural change is different today as some portions of the public have come to see religion as a public harm (Bolce and De Maio 1999). Culturally, the new atheism (Roseneck 2022; Zenk 2013) and globalist movements²⁹ have worked to discredit religious voices and help to make it impossible to enter the public discourse if one argues for intrinsic rights or religious norms³⁰. The contemporary ethos sees religion as a public harm and works to limit the ability of anyone who holds a religious dogma from influencing public policy. In the past, religion was recognized as a good that served the national interests. Today, this is no longer true as religious individuals are easily excluded from public discourse (Crawford

2013)³¹. The public religion is no longer valued, and Americans with a traditional faith may find themselves alienated³² from the dominant society.

Political theorists, such as Rawls and Locke, have argued that liberal institutions are able to solve serious philosophical and religious disputes and prevent cultural wars, such as current contention between secular and religious Americans. [John Perry \(2011\)](#) states that Rawls and Locke are wrong and that liberalism cannot solve the cultural division. The liberal solution cannot be accepted by traditional believers because it places religion under and at the service of the state. It assumes that faithful citizens will accept the subordination of their faith and change their most fundamental loyalties to serve the state and accept the reduction of religion to a social instrument. Perry correctly points out that it is almost impossible to create political institutions that jointly satisfy secular and religious citizens³³. The civil struggle is likely to continue.

This article has focused on internal change domestic to the United States, but it is important to point out one international consequence: Washington will have difficulty maintaining consistent foreign policies in service of its allies. The domestic American response to the 7 October terrorist attacks in Israel and the continued support for Ukraine have brought into the open foreign policy differences between liberal and conservative voters. The 2024 presidential election of Donald Trump argued for limiting military and financial aid to Ukraine without conditions—a position supported by the non-religious population—while both Biden and Harris wanted to place limits on Israel's ability to respond militarily to the Hamas attacks. One particular concern is American policy to Israel and the Middle East when Democrats are in power. The problem is that approximately half of Democrats wish to support and defend Israel while the other half wishes to support the Palestinians and punish Israel. The Republicans and independent voters supported Israel, but Biden faced multiple constraints because if he favored either Israel or the Palestinians too clearly, he risked alienating a substantial portion of Democratic Party voters ([Kamarck et al. 2024](#); [Saad 2023](#); [Taylor 2024](#)). Historically, the Democrats and Republicans have supported Israel and were willing to provide it with aid, weapons, and diplomatic protection. The secular, non-religious, and immigrant Democratic Party supporters oppose this traditional alliance and have been pressuring party leadership to adopt a pro-Palestinian position. This division has real consequences for Washington's Middle East policies and prevented Biden from offering a comprehensive peace plan that could have satisfied both international actors as well as his domestic constituents ([Sanger 2024](#)). Some believed it to be an important cause explaining the Democrats defeat to Donald J. Trump ([Beinart 2024](#)). If one looks at the Ukraine War, one sees the opposite dynamic in that many Republican voters wish to end American military and financial support to Ukraine, while Democrats wish to fund the conflict indefinitely ([Laya et al. 2025](#)). The U.S. appears unreliable to allies who see its policies vacillate as political opposition comes to power ([Gates 2023](#)). American foreign policy is likely to change from administration to administration until a new identity is formed.

The religious and cultural transformation will impact U.S. foreign policy and make Washington seem erratic to its allies. Americans lack a consistent national identity, and while this is present, we will see dramatically different policies from Democratic and Republican Party administrations. The cultural division is going to be present for the coming decades. While it would be dangerous to predict which side will ultimately triumph, the non-religious group has the advantage of being concentrated in the young population. It is likely, simply through normal demographic change, to grow as the older generations gradually pass away.

The United States is struggling to find its identity and the long-held public religion that worked in the background to preserve American democracy has weakened. A cultural

war is emerging between secular and religious citizens where both sides are attempting to win the intellectual contest. The existing governmental institutions lack the capacity to settle the dispute without subsuming religion and making it subordinate to the state. While the United States is divided, its domestic and foreign policy will vacillate more than normal as rival leaders attempt to undo the policies advanced by their predecessors. It is impossible to understand how the decline in national religious faith will impact American democracy, but it is likely to produce a divided society that lacks a definitive identity, making it more difficult for the United States to respond to the global challenges it faces.

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Notes

- ¹ There are multiple surveys from the Pew Research Center, Gallup, and other agencies that are explored later in this paper.
- ² John Adams stated this in his talk to the officers of the Massachusetts Militia on 11 October 1798. It is in the Adams Papers in the Library of Congress (reel 119). It is also quoted in several books, including [Hutson \(2009, p. 76\)](#).
- ³ Johnson's argument is similar to [Max Weber's \(2002\)](#) classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: And Other Writings*.
- ⁴ Herberg has an interesting past as articulated by [Ausmus \(1987\)](#) in his work *Will Herberg: From Right to Right*. Herberg was born in Russia near Minsk and moved to Brooklyn where he joined the communist party. He was expelled from the party in 1929 for supporting Bukharin against Stalin and entirely lost his belief in Marxism in his thirties. He followed Reinhold Niebuhr and became his largest Jewish follower. Herberg also wrote *Judaism and Modern Man* that covered the history of Jewish thought. He eventually worked with William F. Buckley as a religion editor in *The National Review*. His work gained acclaim for his summary of American secular religion, and he was a sociologist who actively participated in theological analysis.
- ⁵ [Sciacca \(1954\)](#) notes that, even if the United States calls itself Christian, its philosophy and culture is atheistic. (See pp. 168–69 in his *La filosofia oggi*.)
- ⁶ [D. L. Schindler \(1996\)](#) recognizes Herberg's scholarship and, along with Alasdair MacIntyre, points out that the simultaneous presence and contradiction between American secularism and religiosity originates in the philosophic anthropology in the Scottish Enlightenment, which grants religion a neutral place, subservient to the main economic and social institutions.
- ⁷ [D. C. Schindler \(2011\)](#), a contemporary theologian writing on Herberg's characterization of American religious life notes, "Any pattern of life or form of thought that denies the significance of receptivity or indirectly undermines its primacy is therefore secular logic. . . no matter what one's intentions may be, this pattern is an implicit atheism [p. 15]".
- ⁸ [Gallup \(2024\)](#) reports that 33% of American adults identify as Protestant and 22% as Catholic.
- ⁹ The Pew Research Center reports higher levels of Americans identifying as non-religious (29%) than Gallup (21%).
- ¹⁰ The United States has fewer atheists compared to contemporary Europe where 8% of Italians, 9% of Greeks, 10% of the Spanish, 12% of the British, 18% of Swedes, and 23% of the French self-report as atheists ([Lipka et al. 2024](#)).
- ¹¹ There is no dataset that directly measures the population that holds the popular religious view, but this can be inferred from the decrease in the overall population identifying as Christian and the percent identifying as non-religious.
- ¹² [Zuckerman et al. \(2016\)](#) point out that this was the first time a sitting president recognized non-believers as part of the national identity in a speech.
- ¹³ [Pasquale \(2010\)](#) notes that 70% of atheists are highly educated, wealthy, and white.
- ¹⁴ The most recent Cooperative Election Survey (CES) randomly selected sixty-thousand Americans and reported approximately 13,572 respondents having no religious preference, 18,463 Protestants, and 11,014 Catholics. The second largest demographic category is Americans who have no religious identity.
- ¹⁵ For a discussion of cultural division or polarization within the United States, see [J. E. Campbell's \(2018\)](#) *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America*; [The Associated Press \(2016\)](#). *Divided America: The Fracturing of a Nation*. New York: Associated Press; [West \(2019\)](#). *Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era*. Germany: Brookings Institution Press.
- ¹⁶ [Zuckerman et al. \(2016\)](#) also notes that there is no automatic political affiliation for non-religious Americans as approximately 20% tend to vote Republican. Nevertheless, there is a clear preference in the majority for the Democratic Party.

This is a national religion, not a governmental one. It was supported by American leaders but never officially controlled by Washington.

Von Balthasar (1996) shows that this relationship also works in reverse as the society produces the individuals who need to uphold the culture. He quotes George Bernanos: “A civilization disappears with the kind of man, the type of humanity, that has issued from it [p. 222]”.

Davis and Slobodchikoff (2019) note that most research considering Western decline focuses on the symptoms but rarely addresses the actual cause: “The problem is that the dominant positivistic mentality prevents the affected cultures from examining the causes of social breakdown while instead focusing on specific signs. As a result, we are unable to identify the origin of Western weakness [p. 106]”. The symptoms are clear, and Wendell Berry provides a good summary in his *The Hidden Wound* (Berry 2010), where he writes, “Mostly, we do not speak of our society as disintegrating. We would prefer not to call what we are experiencing social disintegration. But we are endlessly preoccupied with the symptoms: divorce, venereal disease, murder, rape, debt, bankruptcy, pornography, soil loss, teenage pregnancy, fatherless children, motherless children, child suicide, public child-care, retirement homes, nursing homes, toxic waste, soil and water and air pollution, government secrecy, government lying, government crime, civil violence, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, abortion as ‘birth control’, the explosion of garbage, hopeless poverty, unemployment, unearned wealth. We know the symptoms well enough. All the plagues of our time are symptoms of a general disintegration [pp. 130–31]”.

Bulman (2016) shows that the cultural war and decline in public religion had multiple causes, and it would be wrong to attribute it to political causes alone. Identifying the time when the secular rise became significant does not indicate causality.

American literature can provide insight into cultural changes that are difficult to capture within conventional social science research. Many writers examine this popular religious transformation, but one writer stands out in his representation and the stories he offers are concerning as they reveal what happens when the non-religious ethos spreads into the American mainstream culture. David Foster Wallace (2009) provides a glance into what it means to be an American in this time of transition, which he addresses within his complex novel *Infinite Jest* (Reilly 2022; I. Williams 2016).

Larry Chapp (2011) shows how scientism implies a reduction implies a mechanistic metaphysics, which he calls the “great epistemological sanitizer that has allowed humanity to disinfect our intellectual world and finally rid ourselves of the harmful bacillus that is religion [p. 131]”.

Michael Hanby (2021) notes that Del Noce points out that ideas and words themselves “have ceased to be vessels of truth and communication; they have become instruments—or weapons—of social change” and change social discourse so the “only ‘reason’ held in common is identical with what Del Noce called “scientism”, which is predicated on the philosophical renunciation of universal reason and the unknowability—if not the nonexistence—of ultimate truths and goods [p. 451]”.

In the preface to Del Noce’s *The Crisis of Modernity*, Carlo Lancellotti notes that “In his judgment the affluent society is . . . anti-traditional because its underlying philosophy is a form of radical positivism that recognizes the empirical sciences as the only valid form of knowledge [p. xv]”.

See chap. 1 and 2 in Strauss (2021). *Leo Strauss on Political Philosophy: Responding to the Challenge of Positivism and Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Evans and Menon (2017) provide an interesting account of how British politicians have less ability to impact policy in their work. See *Brexit and British Politics*.

Eberstadt (2016) shows that Americans with a religious faith and hold a politically incorrect position on birth control, abortion, and same-sex marriage are attacked and need to curtail their speech; otherwise, they will face employment issues and find it difficult to feed their family.

Carter (1993) shows how transforming one part of the U.S. Constitution, namely, the Establishment Clause, has changed the government from a protector of religious freedom to a guardian of public secularism (see pp. 122–23 in *The Culture of Disbelief*).

Contemporary atheism is different from the ideological systems present in Marxism, socialism, and national socialism; it is based less on an overarching ideology and more on power and social control. Jean-Luc Marion (2017) argues that it is different from the systems in the past as it is linked to globalization and seeks to standardize consumption and economic policies without regard for individual culture (Lind and Nobre 2020). Marion argues that everything is reduced to its economic worth. Maritain’s (1949) distinguishing from types of atheism and contemporary atheism is new and does not correspond to Maritain’s categories of atheism. MacIntyre and Ricoeur (1969) consider the consequences of atheism, but their work does not address present-day atheism.

Rawls (2005) argues against the idea of a democratic society, stating, “Political liberalism views this insistence on the whole truth in politics as incompatible with democratic citizenship and the idea of legitimate law [p. 447]” (see Gray 1992); Positivism’s proponents argue that constraints exist on freedom in a liberal democracy. Comte provides a good understanding about the freedom as he argues that there is no freedom of conscience. He wrote, “Systematic tolerance cannot exist and really has never existed, except for opinions regarded as indifferent or doubtful [p. 199, quote from Lucien (2020)]”. Strauss provides a significant

perspective on Comte's political philosophy in regard to this topic in his (2021) *Leo Strauss on Political Philosophy: Responding to the Challenge of Positivism and Historicism*.

- 31 Crawford argues, "Hence, in a real way and in peoples' minds, the state and the political order begin to occupy the cultural and social space that "comprehensive doctrines", particularly religious ones, were hitherto thought to occupy. In effect, political liberalism by its very logic and structure cannot help but effectively displace religious faith [p. 432]".
- 32 Hauerwas (1995) observes that Americans have the right to believe what they want but do not have the ability practice their faith.
- 33 Von Balthasar (1996) attributes this social change to the religious population, which is primarily responsible for the national culture.

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