

The Pew Survey on Religious Affiliation in the United States:

A Commentary on Religious Freedom and Diversity

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The recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life on religious affiliation in the United States has drawn national media attention. The extensive survey, conducted from May to August of 2007, included more than 35,000 adult respondents. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the survey reveals that religious affiliation in the United States “is both very diverse and extremely fluid.”

Among the significant findings of the survey is that Americans remain a very religious people. More than 83% of respondents identified with a particular religious tradition and an additional 5.8 percent identified themselves as religious, but not affiliated with any particular faith. Over 78 percent responded that they identified with the Christian tradition, while Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus constituted 1.7, .7, .6, and .4 percent respectively.

The fluidity of religious affiliation in America is revealed by the fact that 28% of adults have left the faith of their childhood and an additional 16% have moved from one denomination to another in the Protestant tradition. Protestants are losing their dominance of the American religious landscape as well. Barely 51% of Americans claim to be Protestant, although more than 26% of Americans are members of Evangelical churches. American Catholics have been impacted most significantly by the active American marketplace, having suffered the greatest percentage loss to religious affiliation. Immigration, however, has sustained this largest Christian tradition—with Catholics now constituting nearly 23.9% of the population.

The Pew Survey affirms a longstanding truism of American religious life: religious commitment and pluralism flourish in a nation committed to religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Indeed religious diversity has characterized American life since the colonial era. The multiplicity of Christian sects led to grudging religious toleration in some colonies and more principled commitment to freedom in others. Nonetheless, by the time of the American Revolution, nine of the thirteen colonies claimed established churches. During the Revolutionary Era many of these found their privileged status eliminated as more Americans began to draw connections between their fight against the political tyranny of Great Britain and the tyranny of established religions.

Religious pluralism and a growing commitment to a religiously neutral state no doubt informed the Framers of the U.S. Constitution as well. Consequently, the original constitution was silent on religion except for Article VI's ban on religious tests to hold public office. Baptists and others of religious dissenting traditions, though, voiced the need for a more explicit protection of religious liberty. Thus, the First Amendment was born.

The language of the First Amendment, “Congress shall make now law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” embodies two complementary principles: no establishment (separation) and free exercise (freedom). These two clauses work together

to ensure religious freedom for all Americans. It has long been recognized that full religious freedom would not be possible without the separation of church and state. As the nineteenth-century church historian, Philip Schaff declared: “The relationship of church and state in the United States secured full liberty of religious thought, speech, and action, within the limits of the public peace and order. . . . Such liberty is impossible on the basis of a union of church and state.”

What have these twin principles of separation and freedom wrought? As the Pew Survey reveals, America has some of the highest percentages of religious commitment in the world. Religious diversity, today much broader than the multiple Protestant sects of the nation’s early history, attests to the religious freedom enjoyed by all Americans. Religious experimentation has also been a hallmark of American religious history witnessed by such indigenous religions such as Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The fluidity of American religion not only reveals the free market tradition of religion in America, but also confirms James Madison’s observation long ago: “For it is known that this Religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them.”

One of the consequences of the high levels of religious identity in the United States is that we find ourselves frequently wrangling over the proper role of religion in American public life. As we debate where to draw the lines separating church and state, it is worth remembering that the principle of separation has not only guaranteed our religious freedom but also has fostered the dynamic religious culture of the United States.