

Executive Summary

Americans change religious affiliation early and often. In total, about half of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once during their lives. Most people who change their religion leave their childhood faith before age 24, and many of those who change religion do so more than once. These are among the key findings of a new survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. The survey documents the fluidity of religious affiliation in the U.S. and describes in detail the patterns and reasons for change.

The reasons people give for changing their religion – or leaving religion altogether – differ widely depending on the origin and destination of the convert. The group that has grown the most in recent years due to religious change is the unaffiliated population. Two-thirds of former Catholics who have become unaffiliated and half of former Protestants who have become unaffiliated say they left their childhood faith because they stopped believing in its teachings, and roughly four-in-ten say they became unaffiliated because they do not believe in God or the teachings of most

Changing Faiths

	Share of U.S. adult population	# of recontact interviews
	%	
Do not currently belong to childhood faith	44	1,894
Raised Catholic, now unaffiliated	4	401
Raised Catholic, now Protestant	5	343
Raised Protestant, now unaffiliated	7	360
Raised Protestant, now different Protestant faith	15	292
Raised unaffiliated, now affiliated	4	350
Other change in religious affiliation*	9	148
Same faith as childhood**	56	973
Changed faith at some point	9	
Have not changed faith	47	
Total	100	2,867

Due to rounding, numbers in this report may not sum to 100, and nested figures may not sum to subtotals indicated.

*This group consists of converts from a variety of different backgrounds, including converts to Catholicism and converts from or to religions other than Catholicism or Protestantism. Because this is such a disparate group, it is not analyzed in most of this report.

**Estimate of religious change among those still in their childhood faith comes from this recontact survey; other estimates from 2007 "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey."

Note: A small number of respondents were excluded from the recontact survey because they gave an ambiguous response to one of the religious affiliation items in the original Landscape Survey, converted within the unaffiliated tradition or belong to small groups within the "other Christian," "other world religions" or "other faiths" religious traditions. In total, these excluded cases represent roughly 4% of the U.S. population.

religions.¹ Additionally, many people who left a religion to become unaffiliated say they did so in part because they think of religious people as hypocritical or judgmental, because religious organizations focus too much on rules or because religious leaders are too focused on power and money. Far fewer say they became unaffiliated because they believe that modern science proves that religion is just superstition.

Catholicism has suffered the greatest net loss in the process of religious change. Many people who leave the Catholic Church do so for religious reasons; two-thirds of former Catholics who have become unaffiliated say they left the Catholic faith because they stopped believing in its teachings, as do half of former Catholics who are now Protestant. Fewer than three-in-ten former Catholics, however, say the clergy sexual abuse scandal factored into their decision to leave Catholicism.

In contrast with other groups, those who switch from one Protestant denominational family to another (e.g., were raised Baptist and are now Methodist) tend to be more likely to do so in response to changed circumstances in their lives. Nearly four-in-ten people who have changed religious affiliation within Protestantism say they left their childhood faith, in part, because they relocated to a new community, and nearly as many say they left their former faith because they married someone from a different religious background.

The new survey is a follow-up to the “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” conducted by the Pew Forum in 2007 and released in 2008, and is based on recontact interviews with members of the largest segments of the population that have changed religious affiliation. This includes more than 300 interviews each with former Catholics who are now unaffiliated, former Catholics who are now Protestant, former Protestants who are now unaffiliated and those raised unaffiliated who now belong to a religious faith. The survey also includes nearly 300 interviews with people who have gone from one denominational family to another within Protestantism and nearly 1,000 interviews with people who still belong to the group in which they were raised. In total, the new survey allows for in-depth analysis of about eight-in-ten of those who now have a different religious affiliation than the one in which they were raised.²

One of the most striking findings from the 2007 Landscape Survey was the large number of people who have left their childhood faith. The 2007 survey found that more than one-in-four American adults (28%) have changed their religious affiliation from that in which they were raised. This number includes people who have changed from one major religious tradition to another,

¹Throughout this report, analyses of the reasons respondents give for leaving their childhood faith and joining their current faith do not include those who say they changed religions as minors as a result of their parents’ decision. See Q.2 and Q.15 in survey topline for details.

²The survey excludes respondents from the following religious traditions as defined in the 2007 Landscape Survey: “other Christian,” “other world religions” and “other faiths.” It also excludes “converts” within the ranks of the unaffiliated (e.g., those who were raised atheist and are now agnostic, or those who were raised agnostic and are now nothing in particular), as well as those who gave an ambiguous current or childhood religion in the original survey. See survey methodology for details.

for instance, from Protestantism to Catholicism or from Judaism to no religion. If change *within* religious traditions is included (e.g., from one Protestant denominational family to another), the survey found that roughly 44% of Americans now profess a religious affiliation different from that in which they were raised.

The results of the new survey offer a fuller picture of the churn within American religion and suggest that previous estimates actually may have *understated* the amount of religious change taking place in the U.S. First, among the 56% of the population that currently belongs to the same religion as the one in which they were raised, one-in-six (16%) say there was a time in their life when they had a different faith than they have now. Combined with the 44% of the public that currently espouses a religion different than their childhood faith, this means that roughly half of the U.S. adult population has changed religion at some point in their life.³ Moreover, it is also clear that many people have changed religious affiliation more than once. For example, roughly two-thirds of those who were raised Catholic or Protestant but now say they are not affiliated with any particular religion have changed faiths at least twice in their life, including those who have changed within the unaffiliated tradition (e.g., from atheist to agnostic). The same is true for roughly half of former Catholics who have become Protestant, people who have changed denominational families within Protestantism and people who have become affiliated with a religion after having been raised unaffiliated.

Many Change Religions More Than Once

Among...	# of religious changes			
	One	Two	Three or more	
Former Catholics	%	%	%	
Now unaffiliated	38	36	26	=100
Now Protestant	46	33	21	=100
Former Protestants				
Now unaffiliated	30	38	32	=100
Now different Protestant faith	49	28	23	=100
Formerly unaffiliated				
Now affiliated with a religion	47	32	21	=100

Estimates based on a series of yes/no questions asking whether respondents have ever been Baptist, Methodist, a nondenominational Christian, Lutheran, part of any other Protestant church, Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, just nothing in particular, an atheist, an agnostic or part of any other religion. See Q.22a-Q.22i in survey topline for details.

³ The original Landscape Survey had a margin of error of ± 0.6 percentage points and estimated that 44% of adults currently belong to a religion different than the one in which they were raised, while 56% still belong to their childhood faith. The estimate that 16% of those who still belong to their childhood religion (9% of the total population) say there was a time in their life when they had a different faith than they have now comes from the 973 follow-up interviews and has a margin of error of ± 5 percentage points. Thus, we estimate that as few as 47% $[(44-1)+(9-5)=47]$ and as many as 59% $[(44+1) + (9+5)=59]$ of U.S. adults have changed religious affiliation at least once.

The survey finds that religious change begins early in life. Most of those who decided to leave their childhood faith say they did so before reaching age 24, and a large majority say they joined their current religion before reaching age 36. Very few report changing religions after reaching age 50.

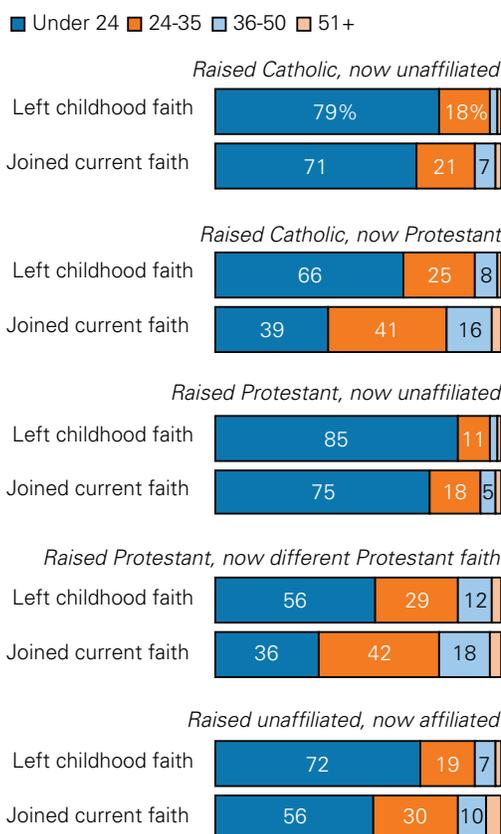
Religious commitment as a child and teenager may be related to the propensity to change religion. The survey finds key differences, for example, in the levels of teenage (ages 13-18) religious commitment between former Catholics who have become unaffiliated and those who have kept their childhood faith. Former Catholics who are now unaffiliated are much less likely than lifelong Catholics to have attended Mass regularly or to have had very strong faith as teenagers.

Similarly, currently unaffiliated former Catholics are somewhat less likely than those who have remained Catholic to say they had very strong faith as children. On other measures, however, such as participation in youth groups or religious education classes, there are few differences in childhood religious commitment between those who have remained Catholic and those who have left the Catholic Church to become unaffiliated.

The survey also finds major differences in childhood religious practices and commitment between lifelong Protestants and those who have left Protestantism to become unaffiliated. Former Protestants who are now unaffiliated are less likely to have regularly attended worship services as a child and even less likely to have attended regularly as a teenager. They also are much less likely to report having attended Sunday school or having had very strong religious faith as a child or a teenager.

The faith of most people who have changed religions was on the wane in the year or two prior to leaving their childhood religion, with few saying they had very strong faith during this time. Among those who left Catholicism and are now Protestant, for example, fewer than one-in-four (23%) say their faith was very strong just prior to leaving the Catholic Church. Among those who switched from one Protestant denominational family to another, only 30% say their faith was very strong just prior to leaving their childhood religion. The numbers are even lower among those who have become unaffiliated, with only 10% of former Catholics and 11% of former Protestants saying they had very strong faith just before leaving their former religion. This is consistent with

Age of Change



See Q.1/Q.1a and Q.14/Q.14a in survey topline for exact question wording. Results repercentaged to exclude nonresponse.

Religious Change Over the Life Cycle

	Raised Catholic			Raised Protestant		
	Still Catholic	Now Protestant	Now unaffiliated	Still in childhood faith	Now diff. Protestant faith	Now unaffiliated
<i>% very strong faith...</i>	%	%	%	%	%	%
As child	46	35	30	41	35	18
As teen	34	22	12	40	32	12
Prior to leaving faith	--	23	10	--	30	11
<i>% worship weekly...</i>						
As child	86	79	74	77	78	64
As teen	69	60	44	63	64	29
<i>% attended...</i>						
Sunday school regularly	71	68	68	65	66	51
Teen relig. youth groups*	32	29	32	55	47	36
Attended Catholic HS	25	16	20	--	--	--

*Includes only those respondents who participated in youth groups associated with their childhood faith.

See Q.6b-Q.12 in survey topline for exact question wording.

another of the survey's key findings – that among both former Protestants and former Catholics who are now unaffiliated, more than seven-in-ten say they just gradually drifted away from their childhood religion.

Reasons for Changing Religions

The new survey includes two types of questions that probe the reasons people change religious affiliation. Respondents received a set of closed-ended (yes-or-no) questions that asked whether or not various reasons factored into their decision to leave their former religion and join their current one. Respondents also were asked open-ended questions that gave them the opportunity to explain in their own words the main reason they left their former religion and joined their current one.

In response to the yes-or-no questions, people give a diverse array of reasons for changing their religion. For instance, the most common reason for leaving Catholicism cited by former Catholics who have become Protestant is that their spiritual needs were not being met (71%). A similar

number of former Catholics who have become Protestant say they left their former religion because they found another faith they liked more; nearly six-in-ten of those who changed denominational families within Protestantism also say this. Not surprisingly, many who have changed religion say they left their former religion because they stopped believing in its teachings. For example, nearly two-thirds of former Catholics who have become unaffiliated say they left the Catholic Church because they stopped believing in its teachings. This sentiment is also expressed by half of former Catholics who have become Protestant as well as half of former Protestants who have become unaffiliated.

Common Reasons for Leaving Childhood Religion

	Raised Cath., now unaffil.	Raised Cath., now Prot.	Raised Prot., now unaffil.	Raised Prot., now diff. Prot. faith	Raised unaffil., now affiliated with a religion
<i>% saying important reason left former religion</i>	%	%	%	%	%
Just gradually drifted away from the religion	71	54	71	40	--
Spiritual needs not being met	43	71	39	51	51
Stopped believing in the religion's teachings	65	50	50	15	--
Found a religion they liked more	10	70	11	58	46
Unhappy with teachings about the Bible	29	43	36	23	--
Dissatis. with atmosphere at worship services	26	32	29	39	--
Dissatisfied with clergy at congregation	18	27	25	36	--
N	379	320	338	265	313

Respondents were asked whether or not each item was an important reason for leaving their former religion and could answer "yes" to more than one reason. See Q.4a-Q.4s in survey topline for exact question wording.

When asked in the open-ended question to explain in their own words the *main* reason they are no longer part of their former religion, roughly half of former Catholics give an explanation related to religious and moral beliefs. The same is true of roughly four-in-ten former Protestants who have become unaffiliated.

In Their Own Words - *Main* Reasons for Leaving Childhood Religion

	Raised Cath., now unaffil.	Raised Cath., now Prot.	Raised Prot., now unaffil.	Raised Prot., now diff. Prot. faith	Raised unaffil., now affiliated with a religion
	%	%	%	%	%
Religious and moral beliefs	54	47	42	18	19
<i>Do not believe in former religion/any religion</i>	21	16	14	6	*
<i>Biblical/Scriptural reason</i>	2	18	4	2	5
Religious institutions, practices and people	42	32	22	36	24
<i>Pedophilia scandal/Molestation</i>	2	3	0	0	0
Personal spirituality	6	9	9	6	26
<i>Looking for answers/something deeper</i>	0	*	*	1	12
Life cycle changes	5	18	4	30	20
<i>Family reasons</i>	4	18	2	22	16
Other reasons	10	7	22	16	9
Don't know/Refused	4	3	10	5	9
N	379	320	338	265	313

Respondents were asked to describe in their own words the main reason for leaving their former religion and could provide more than one reason. See Q.3 in survey topline for exact question wording.

By contrast, those who have changed denominational families within Protestantism are much less likely to cite beliefs as the main reason for leaving their former religious group; the same is true for those who have become affiliated with a religion after having been raised unaffiliated. Instead, those changing within Protestantism tend to cite likes and dislikes about religious institutions, practices and people (36%) as the main reason for leaving their former faith. Life cycle changes also figure prominently for this group, with three-in-ten mentioning marriage, family or other changes in their life as reasons for their departure from their childhood faith. Many (26%) of those who have become affiliated after having been raised unaffiliated cite reasons related to personal spirituality as an explanation for why they first became involved with a religion.

These and other topics are explored in greater detail in the remainder of this report, which focuses on the largest segments of the U.S. population that have changed religious affiliation. The first section looks at those who have entered or departed the ranks of the unaffiliated. The second

section takes a detailed look at those who have left Catholicism. And the third section examines the reasons why people change affiliation within Protestantism.

Key Findings

Entering and Leaving the Ranks of the Unaffiliated

The category of people who are unaffiliated with any particular religion has grown more rapidly than any other religious group in recent decades. According to the 2007 Landscape Survey, 16% of American adults say they are currently unaffiliated with any particular religion, compared with only 7% who were raised unaffiliated.

About half of those who have become unaffiliated say – in response to the survey’s yes-or-no questions – that they became unaffiliated, at least in part, because they think of religious people as hypocritical, judgmental or insincere. Large numbers also say they became unaffiliated because they think that religious organizations focus too much on rules and not enough on spirituality, or that religious leaders are too focused on money and power rather than truth and spirituality. Another reason cited by many people who are now unaffiliated is the belief that many religions are partly true but no single religion is completely true. Fewer people, however, say they became unaffiliated because they think modern science proves that religion is just superstition, indicating that the belief that science disproves religion is a less important reason for becoming unaffiliated than disenchantment with religious people or institutions.

At the same time that the ranks of the unaffiliated have grown, the Landscape Survey also revealed that the unaffiliated have one of the lowest retention rates of any of the major religious groups, with most people who were raised unaffiliated now belonging to one religion or another. Those who leave the ranks of the unaffiliated cite several reasons for joining a faith, such as the attraction of religious services and styles of worship (74%), having been spiritually unfulfilled while unaffiliated (51%) or feeling called by God (55%).

One of the key findings of the Landscape Survey was that the unaffiliated population is a very diverse group. Not all those who are unaffiliated lack spiritual beliefs or religious behaviors; in fact, roughly four-in-ten unaffiliated individuals say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives. The new survey shows that a significant number of those who left their childhood faith and have become unaffiliated leave open the possibility that they may one day join a religion. Among both those who were raised Catholic and Protestant who are now unaffiliated, for example, roughly one-in-three say they just have not found the right religion yet.

Leaving Catholicism

One-in-ten American adults is a former Catholic. Former Catholics are about evenly divided between those who have become unaffiliated and those who have become Protestant, with a smaller number leaving Catholicism for other faiths. In response to the yes-or-no questions about why they left the Catholic Church, nearly six-in-ten former Catholics who are now unaffiliated say they left Catholicism due to dissatisfaction with Catholic teachings on abortion and homosexuality, about half cite concerns about Catholic teachings on birth control and roughly four-in-ten name unhappiness with Catholicism's treatment of women.

The reasons for leaving Catholicism given by former Catholics who have converted to evangelical Protestantism differ in some important ways from those offered by former Catholics who have joined mainline Protestant churches.⁴ Most former Catholics who are now evangelical Protestants, for example, say they left Catholicism in part because they stopped believing in Catholic teachings (62%) and specifically because they were unhappy with Catholic teachings about the Bible (55%). These sentiments are expressed by far fewer converts to mainline Protestantism (20% stopped believing in Catholic teachings and 16% specifically were unhappy with Catholic teachings about the Bible), who instead are much more likely to say they left Catholicism because they married a non-Catholic (44%) or because they were dissatisfied with the priests at their parish (39%).

Changing Within Protestantism

The single largest group in the U.S. adult population that has changed affiliation is made up of those who have changed from one Protestant denominational family to another. Overall, 15% of Americans were raised as Protestants and now belong to a different Protestant faith than the one in which they were raised. More so than for those in other groups, those who change affiliation within Protestantism tend to do so because of life cycle changes. In response to the survey's yes-or-no questions, nearly four-in-ten within this group say they left their childhood denominational family because they moved to a new community, and one-third say they left their former faith because they married someone from a different religious background. Those who have changed within Protestantism also are less likely than others to say their decision to leave their childhood faith was motivated by a loss of belief in the religion's teachings. Nevertheless, majorities of those who have changed affiliations within Protestantism say they left their childhood faith in part because they found another religion that is preferable (58%) or because they were spiritually unfulfilled in their former faith (51%).

⁴The recontact survey did not include enough interviews with formerly Catholic members of historically black Protestant churches to be able to examine them separately.