Examining Trends (Especially Decline) in Religious Groups

Ronald Lawson

On August 8, the Pew Research Center hosted a round-table on "Religion Trends in the US," featuring sociologists Claude Fischer of the University of California at Berkeley and Michael Hout of New York University; Gallup's Editor-in-Chief Frank Newport; and the Pew Research Center's Greg Smith, the Director of US Religion Surveys for the Religion & Public Life Project.

The discussion explored the rise of the religious "nones" and other important trends in American religion, based on data from the Pew Research Center, Gallup and General Social Survey. The panelists addressed many questions, including: What are the reasons for the growth in the share of the U.S. population that is religiously unaffiliated? What does the rise of the "nones" suggest for the future of religious institutions and organizations – and American religion in general? Is America, as a whole, becoming less religious or more religious? What generational patterns are apparent from the data? And what is the political consequence of the growth of the "nones"?

This week, the latest edition of the Spectrum *journal is arriving in subscriber's mailboxes. One article in the journal also delves into religion trends: the piece by Ronald Lawson and Ryan T. Cragun compares Mormons, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. The authors explore the growth of the three different churches, using data and research to try to understand the different factors that has made them grow differently in diverse geographic locations. They examine factors of supply, demand and secularization.*
In light of his research, Ronald Lawson responds to the Pew discussion: 23 August 2013

I found the Pew discussion fascinating both in its details and as an example of how social scientific findings vary according to the issue the researcher/commentator has in mind and the data being used.

Hout and Fischer, the two academics participating in the discussion, were (and are) intrigued by the growth in the proportion of American respondents reporting that they do not identify with any religion or religious group (those responding "no religion", who have been dubbed "nones"), which doubled, according to General Social Survey (GSS) data, from 7% to 14% during the 1990s. They found two chief components to this change: political liberals responding in disgust to the growing connection between American churches and conservative politics, and the emergence of a new generation that was less religious that the oldest generation that was disappearing from current surveys.

In the 1990s they concluded that the first factor was responsible for 60% of the change, the second for 40%. A decade later, after a Pew survey had found 20% no longer identified with any religious group, these academics took another hard look at the data. They now report that the generational component has risen from 40% to 60%, because the so-called Millennial generation was proving to be even less attached to organized religion. However, what they had described as the political component was stronger too in its own way, with 40% of liberals now falling among the 'nones'.

These findings raise interesting questions for Adventists. To what extent are current Adventist youth attached to each other rather than identifying as Adventists? Will those who attend the services featuring contemporary music with their friends on Adventist campuses continue to attend Adventist worship once they graduate? Indeed, to what extent do they do other things, such as going to the beach, to wineries, camping, and to malls with their fellow students or other friends on Sabbath? And what of the larger

numbers enrolled in secular campuses, or those who do not continue with their education and whom we do not usually even mention - to what extent are these attached to the Adventist organization, or their congregations?
Also, to what extent are Adventists feeling embarrassment with the kind of judgmental politics so often associated with Evangelicals, Mormons, Catholics, some parts of Mainline churches, and yes, Adventist sermons and articles - the often vitriolic anti-gay, anti-choice, anti-immigrant rhetoric, opposing legislation that would help protect the poor and vulnerable? I have often found myself explaining, in embarrassment, to classes of students enrolled in my "Religion and Politics" course, that "I am not that kind of Christian - my faith liberates people, rather than shackling and judging them, and my politics is not directed by my personal interests, but by a preferential option for the poor." Surveys suggest that such at attitude makes me an atypical Adventist. I hope the balance is shifting.

Enter Newport, from the Gallup organization, also looking at the "nones," but using different data (from surveys with huge samples taken annually between 2008 and 2012) with a different concern, and new insights. Yes, he too agrees that the trend of respondents identifying with no religious organization is strongly upward, but he finds that the changes in other measures of religiosity do not correlate so well with this one. Gallup had one survey in the 1950s with 0% "nones," but by 2012 they reported 18% - in the same ballpark as Pew. But a goodly number of these report that they pray sometimes, or that religion is important to them. So what is going on? How can these data be explained?

Newport draws an analogy: just as LGBT people are now more willing to admit to being gay because society is more accepting, so those who no longer attend church feel more comfortable admitting that they do not identify in any significant way with any religious organization - even though they might still turn to prayer sometimes. It interested me that almost all of these previously listed themselves as Protestants. While the shift between 2008 and 2012 occurred among all age groups, the proportion of "nones," and the increase within just that short period, was by far highest among the young.

If you check out the paper by my friend and colleague Ryan Cragun and me in the current issue of *Spectrum*, you will find a stark example of this phenomenon among Jehovah's Witnesses. They count only those actively witnessing in their membership statistics, but many others, most of whom have probably stopped attending meetings, which are closely geared to witnessing, continue to identify as Witnesses to census and survey questions; no doubt many more who once did that have ceased doing so.

The same pattern is true of Adventists: the official church membership in North America is a little over one million, but when we count the number of people in church on a given Sabbath, it is about half that - and those include unbaptized children and visitors. However, there are going to be some members who attend "regularly" (a designation these days for those who attend at least once monthly during non-summer months) who are not there on that day.

Monte Sahlin, based on studies in dozens of NAD congregations, estimates that 70-75% of the baptized members attend at least at that level, which leaves us with a quarter of our listed membership as not attending. However - note this well - he also estimates that the number of former Adventists in the NAD (that is, people who were once baptized and on the rolls but are no longer counted as Adventists in denominational statistics, and who no longer identify as Adventists) is about two million, twice the current membership. And yes, the drop-out rate is highest among the youth. Roger Dudley and Janet Kangas selected a sample of over 1,500 15-16 year-old Adventist youth in the later 1980s and attempted to follow them with questionnaires every two years for ten years. Over time a goodly number fell out, no longer responding, but the authors generalized from those who continued to respond, concluding that 55% had

remained active Adventists. However, my own research suggests that those who cease answering commonly do so because they are no longer interested in church, so that I would argue that the drop-out rate then was undoubtedly way higher than 45%. What is it among today's Millennial generation, which is widely recognized as less likely to be committed to organizations?

The studies reported in the Pew forum have focused on increases in the number of "nones," and the interest in this topic grows out of the serious decline of Americans active in Mainline churches in recent decades. In our articles, Cragun and I have been interested in differences in the growth of three religious groups - Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses, or what we colloquially label "MAW" - that all came out of America in the nineteenth century and set out to globalize. That is a somewhat different focus.

So far we have used official membership data, though the next one in the hopper will compare those with census data. The article which appears in *Spectrum* this summer is a shortened version (thanks to the work of Fritz Guy) of what was published a year ago in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.* That article was the second in our series. It refers to our first article, "The Secular Transition: The Worldwide Growth of Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists," which was published in *Sociology of Religion* in the Fall of 2010, but it is the latter that lays out our theory.

We examined aggregate membership data over time for nearly every country in the world and, first, noted that growth of a religious group normally depends on the presence of both supply of and demand for it: it must be present, seeking converts, and the local people must be responsive. If either is missing, or the supply available does not address the particular demand there, very little growth occurs. We would see the contraction in religious participation and identity in the US as a result of declining demand, since there is plenty of supply here. That is, the US is experiencing secularization. We regard the statement by Hout and Fischer that their analysis finds nothing related to secularization as baffling: demographic turnover may explain 60% of the difference in religious affiliation since 1990, but this does not mean that secularization has not occurred. Youth are less religious that their parents, grandparents, etc., and that means that secularization is at work.

Our theory of "secular transition" emerged as we found that growth eventually slows down everywhere as a result of "saturation" (the idea that most of those who are likely converts have already been contacted by that group) and, in the most economically developed countries, reduced demand for religion. The latter typically happens when countries reach a level of economic development of 0.8 or higher on the United Nations Human Development Index. After that point, all three of the religious groups we studied eventually experience very little or no growth; the decline of Mainline groups begins even earlier. The membership of all three groups has been declining in several countries in Western Europe and Japan, and has slowed sharply in the rest of the developed world. This includes the US and Canada, where if it were not for a substantial flow of Adventists immigrating from countries in the developing world and other non-Adventist immigrants being still open to conversion, Adventist growth would now be close to non-existent.

Given our focus and findings, we therefore disagree with those who as part of this Pew forum stated that they thought secularization insignificant in its impact on church membership and participation.