

# Fewer than half of Americans may be Christian by 2070

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—America long has prided itself on being a country where people can choose whatever religion they like. The majority has long chosen Christianity, but by 2070, that may no longer be the case.

If current trends continue, Christians could make up less than half of the population—and as little as a third—in 50 years.

Meanwhile, the so-called nones—the religiously unaffiliated—could make up close to half of the population. And the percentage of Americans who identify as Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and other non-Christian faiths could double.

Those are among the major findings of a new report from the Pew Research Center regarding America's religious future—a future where Christianity, though diminished, persists while non-Christian faiths grow amid rising secularization.

## Using multiple factors to project future

Researchers projected possible religious futures for the United States using a number of factors, including birth rates, migration patterns, demographics like age and sex, and the current religious landscape.

They also looked at how religion is passed from one generation to another and how often people switch religions—in particular, Christians who become nones, a number that has been increasing in recent years.

They projected four different scenarios, based on differing rates of religious switching—from a continued increase to no switching at all.

“While the scenarios in this report vary in the extent of religious disaffiliation they project, they all show Christians continuing to shrink as a share of the U.S. population, even under the counterfactual assumption that all switching came to a complete stop in 2020,” according to the report. “At the same time, the unaffiliated are projected to grow under all four scenarios.”

## **Increasing numbers become disaffiliated**

Currently, about a third (31 percent) of Christians become disaffiliated before they turn 30, according to Pew Research. Twenty-one percent of nones become Christian as young adults. Should those switching rates remain stable, Christians would make up 46 percent of the population by 2070, while nones would make up 41 percent of the population.

If disaffiliation rates continue to grow but are capped at 50 percent of Christians leaving the faith, then 39 percent of Americans are projected to be Christian by 2070, with 48 percent of Americans identifying as nones.

With no limit placed on the percentage of people leaving Christianity and with continued growth in disaffiliation, Christians would be 35 percent of the population, with nones making up a majority of Americans (52 percent).

If all switching came to a halt, then Christians would remain a slight majority (54 percent), while nones would make up 34 percent of Americans, according to the projection model.

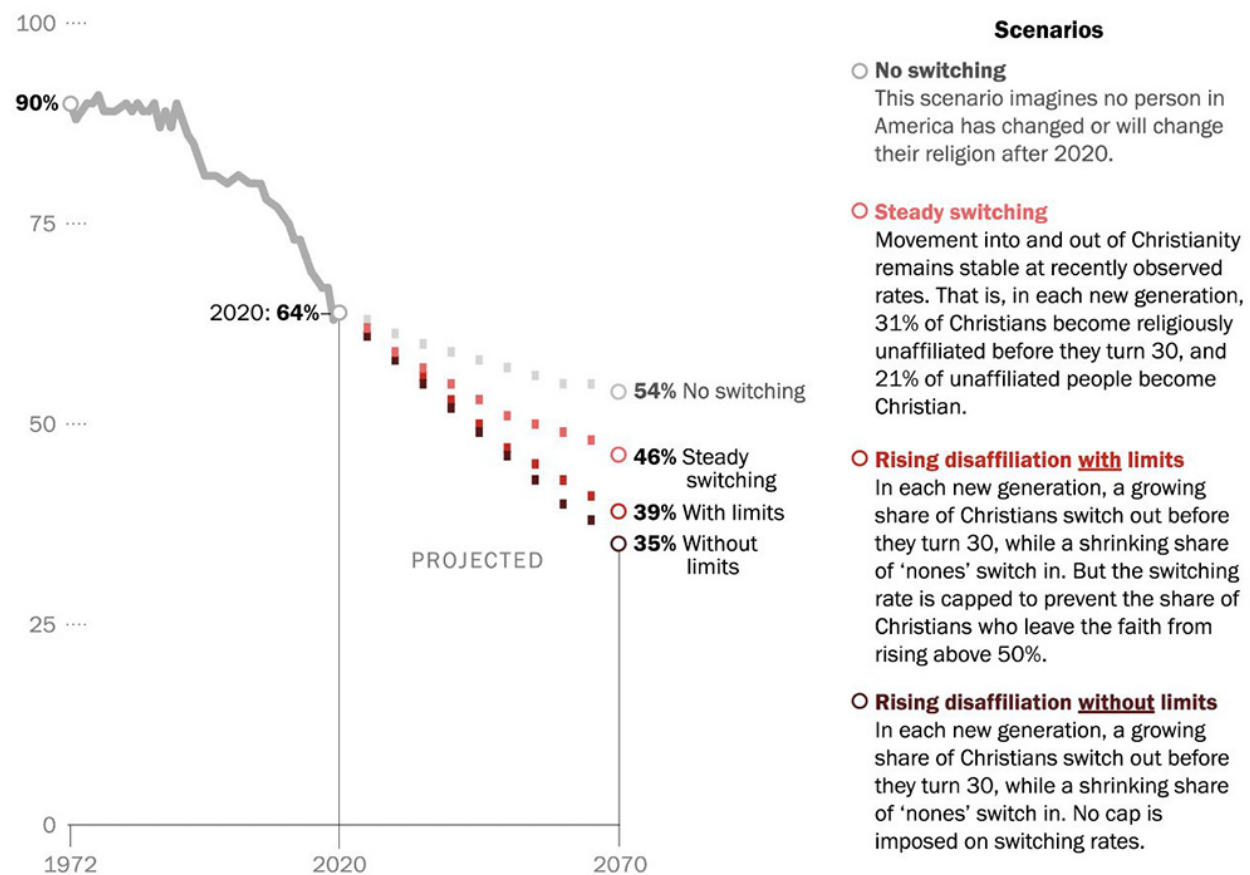
Non-Christian faiths would rise to 12 percent to 13 percent of the population, largely due to migration, in each scenario. Migration does

affect the percentage of Christians, as most immigrants coming to the United States are Christians, said Conrad Hackett, associate director of research and senior demographer at Pew Research Center.

“Still the greatest amount of change in the U.S., we think currently and in the future, will come from switching,” he said.

## U.S. Christians projected to fall below 50% of population if recent trends continue

*% of Americans who are Christian*



Note: Historical data describes trends among U.S. adults based on surveys of adults. The 2020 estimate and subsequent projections show Americans of all ages. In 2020, we estimate that the religious composition of people of all ages roughly matches the adult composition. Sources: General Social Survey (1972-2006); Pew Research Center surveys (2007-2021); Pew Research Center projections (2020-2070). “Modeling the Future of Religion in America”

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# Projections not predictions

Researchers stressed the report contained projections based on data and mathematical models, not predictions of the future.

“Though some scenarios are more plausible than others, the future is uncertain, and it is possible for the religious composition of the United States in 2070 to fall outside the ranges projected,” they wrote.

One reason for the decline among Christians and the growth among the nones in the models is age. While Christians have more children than nones, they are also older. Pew estimates the average Christian in the United States is 43, which is 10 years older than the average none.

“The unaffiliated are having and raising unaffiliated children while Christians are more likely to be near the end of their lives than others,” Stephanie Kramer, a senior researcher at Pew, told RNS in an email.

Using mathematical models, Pew has also projected the future of religion around the world. Those models were adapted for different regions, said Hackett. Muslims, for example, he said, tend to have the youngest population and the highest fertility rates, driving the growth of that faith.

However, he said, in the Gulf states, migration has brought many Christians from other countries to the region as temporary workers.

## Examining multiple variables

The current report takes advantage of the amount of data collected about the U.S. religious landscape. Researchers also looked at intergenerational transmission for the first time, said Kramer.

“The variables we use to study that were: What is the mother’s religion?

And what is the teen's religion," she said. "If that was a match, we consider the mother's religion transmitted."

Researchers also looked at a relatively new trend of disaffiliation among older Americans. Sociologists have long focused on younger people, who are most likely to switch religions. But in the United States and other countries, older people are also starting to switch at growing rates.

"It's not as large scale, but it's still significant," said Hackett. "And it's contributing to the religious change that we have experienced and that we expect to experience in the years ahead."

Hackett said that the projections do not show the end of Christianity in the U.S. or of religion in general, which he expects to remain robust. And most nones, while claiming no religion, do not identify as atheists.

Kramer said the United States appears to be going through a pattern of secularization that has happened in other countries, though "we may be a bit behind," she added.

Other factors outside the model—such as changing immigration patterns and religious innovation—could lead to a revival of Christianity in the United States, according to the report. But none of the models shows a reversal of the decline of Christian affiliation, which dropped from 78 percent in 2007 to 63 percent in 2020, according to Pew research.

In the report, researchers note that "there is no data on which to model a sudden or gradual revival of Christianity (or of religion in general) in the U.S."

"That does not mean a religious revival is impossible," they wrote. "It means there is no demographic basis on which to project one."

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