

Opinion: The future of American Christianity

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(ABP) — Trinity College's [American Religious Identification Survey](#) was [released](#) March 9. Its headline finding, as summarized by *USA Today*: "Faith is shifting, drifting or vanishing outright." The news that "almost all denominations are losing ground" is sobering indeed. It helps to clarify that recent budget cuts in Baptist life and elsewhere are not just about our current Great Economic Meltdown, but instead dovetail with a broader fade of organized American Christianity.

First, let's consider some of the most important numbers, in case you missed them. Since 1990:

- *The percentage of Americans who self-identify as Christians has dropped by 11%, over half a percentage point per year.*



David Gushee

- *The percentage who claim no religion has nearly doubled, from 8% to 15%. The "Don't Know/Refused" group also more than doubled, from 2.3% to 5.2%.*
- *Self-identified Baptists have dropped from 19.3% to 15.8% of the*

population.

- *Mainline Protestants have dropped from 18.7% of the population to only 12.9%; Methodists went from 8% to 5%. At that rate, the mainline will die within 40 years.*
- *The percentage who identify as Wiccans or other new religious movements has increased from 0.8% to 1.2%, a small but rapidly growing number. Adherents of Eastern religions have also doubled numerically, as has the Muslim population.*
- *The percentage of Catholics has dropped only slightly, from 26.2% to 25.1%.*
- *Those who identify as “followers of Jesus” or some other kind of generic Christian represent 14.2% of the population, down a bit from 14.8% in 1990 but still representing 32 million people.*

We are a nation still populated by a majority of self-identified Christians — nearly 75% claim some relation to Christian faith. But the numbers are dropping quickly; if trends continue, Christians will constitute 64% of the population in 2026, and barely half in 2044. The shortfall will be made up primarily by what statisticians of religion are starting to call the “Nones,” pure secularists who claim no religious affiliation.

In terms of the culture-war battles that have wracked the nation for a generation, unless wise new leadership emerges in both the Christian and the secularist communities, vicious battles will continue over all manner of symbolic and substantive issues — from monuments on courthouse grounds to abortion, gay rights and the use of religion in the armed forces. It also seems likely that the volleys between aggressive atheists like Richard Dawkins and those seeking to counter them will only intensify.

There will continue to be sharp regional differences, as secularist numbers spike in the West and Northeast (Vermont led the nation with a 34% None population) and grow more slowly in the Bible Belt. Increasingly,

secularists and their children and grandchildren will have no exposure to the Bible and Christian traditions, and therefore little interest in or understanding of the residual cultural overlay of religiosity still apparent in our national life.

What does all of this mean for Christian mission and our witness in culture and politics?

I think we will witness (are already witnessing) a winnowing process in which weak, ineffective, or maladaptive churches and religious organizations are simply going to die. Congregations will close, parachurch organizations and schools will shut down, and entire denominations will fold or merge with others. Creative efforts will be required everywhere to forestall this fate.

It is likely that surviving denominations, including the Baptist bodies, will have to consolidate their operations. It is hard to imagine there being six surviving Southern Baptist Convention seminaries a generation from now, or over a dozen Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-related seminaries and divinity schools. It could be (ironically enough) a Darwinian moment, as only the strongest and most adaptive survive.

Many congregations and parachurch groups will drop denominational labels in order to ensure their greatest chance of success and not be damaged by denominational-brand baggage. This will continue to deeply challenge the ongoing significance of, for example, Baptist identity.

Christian colleges will have to decide how serious they are about their faith identification. Those that deliver excellent education in a context of robust spiritual vitality will do better than those that provide only one of the above — or neither. The weakest of these colleges will also merge or die.

Christians who bring faith-based moral convictions into the public square will win less and less. Some will respond by just shouting more loudly, thus

turning more people away from Christ. Others will shift to a paradigm of faithful witness rather than cultural victory. Broad-based coalitions across religious and ideological lines will be a necessity.

The era in which cultural Christianity delivered bodies and dollars to churches and sustained thousands of often marginally effective Christian organizations is ending. The era in which Christians could afford to spend their time and money fighting with each other in the pews or the annual conventions or the newspapers is ending.

We will either deliver to people vital, meaningful, life-changing, Christ-following Christianity, or we will die of our own irrelevance.

-David Gushee is distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University.