

## **God's Country**

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A new survey of the American religious landscape, out this week from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, confirms the dynamism of American religious experience. Its results stand in contrast to Europe, where Christian observance has slowly withered under the Continent's now moribund state-sanctioned churches.

Some 60% of Americans say religion is "very important" to them. That's compared with 12% for the French and 25% for the Italians. The study describes a "competitive religious marketplace" in which 84% of Americans claim one of hundreds of religious affiliations -- from Pentecostalism and Judaism to Islam and Mormonism.

Perhaps the most striking finding is that 44% of American adults have switched religious affiliations at some point. There are reasons to find this statistic troubling. People who leave one denomination for another may be more concerned with fulfilling their boutique church-going desires than with meeting the moral obligations of a religious group or the demands of a doctrine. That almost a third of respondents also said they were married to someone of a different faith suggests religion has become more a matter of individual conscience than of continuity and tradition.

Yet there is something remarkable about so much religious diversity. Elsewhere in the world, religious difference is often a cause for violence and ostracism. America so honors the principle of religious tolerance that it has brought it into the home. Pew's statistic about church-switching may be less a sign of spiritual flakiness than an emblem of freedom.

It should be noted that a third of the survey's "converts" have gone from one Protestant congregation to another. In short, America is not, on the whole, giving up serious worship for the sake of New Age platitudes. Half of Americans who grew up without any religious affiliation adopted one in adulthood. Clearly Americans are still convinced there is a such a thing as religious truth -- and it's worth their time to search for it. Sorry, Mr. Hitchens.

The Pew survey confirms what scholars have been saying for years about the winners and losers in this religious economy: Religions that demand the most of people are growing the fastest. The mainline Protestant churches -- with their less exclusionary views of salvation, looser rules for sexual conduct and sermons

about social justice -- have lost membership, especially since the early 1990s. The more traditional evangelical churches keep growing.

There's a similar dynamic in the Catholic Church. Broadly, it has been losing members rapidly -- as much as a third of the native-born Catholic population. Meanwhile, it has gained members among foreign-born (mostly Hispanic) residents, who are often attracted to more conservative pastors and parishes. We'd encourage our friends on the right who want to limit immigration to consider the health of our churches.

While we're in an international frame of mind, it's worth considering the charge made by detractors here and abroad that Americans are modern-day crusaders, set on forcing their world view on other parts of the globe. Well, if there is a single "American" view, it is found in the belief that "we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights." But the one-view theory hardly squares with the portrait drawn by the Pew study. It shows instead a country filled with dozens of minority religions, expressing diverse beliefs, and doing so free of coercion.