**Globally, Religion Defies Easily Identified Patterns**

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The world is growing more religious. Or maybe it’s not.

On Friday, the [National Opinion Research Center](http://www.norc.org/homepage.htm) at the [University of Chicago](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/university_of_chicago/index.html?inline=nyt-org) released what it described as “the most comprehensive analysis to date of global religious trends.” Anyone studying its 9,000-word analysis and perusing 330 additional pages of references and tables will be quickly disabused of the idea that the currents of religious belief and practice are flowing in one or two or even a half-dozen clear directions.

“Religious change around the world is a complex phenomenon,” [the report](http://news.uchicago.edu/news.php?asset_id=1748) begins, in an almost comic understatement. “No simple description such as secularization, religious revival, or believing without belonging captures the complexity of the process.”

The report mines dozens of surveys by American and European social science researchers that measure religious trends over the last four decades in the United States, Western and Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the world.

The United States, as often noted, remains unusually religious among advanced industrial nations. Nearly 6 out of 10 Americans pray one or more times each day; high percentages report feeling close to God, experiencing God’s presence or guidance on most days. Faith in God, they say, is “very important” in their lives.

Nonetheless, belief in God has slipped a little, and more Americans, though still believing, acknowledge some uncertainty about God’s existence. A growing number of Americans no longer identify themselves with any particular religious group. Those who do belong are less likely to say they are strong members. Regular attendance at religious services has declined, and the numbers never worshiping have increased.

Yet more Americans believe in a life after death and pray daily than in the 1970s. And to complicate things, most of these trends have had their ups and downs, leaving open the possibility of future spurts or reversals.

“The tilt of religious change in the United States over the last half century has clearly been in the secular direction,” the report concludes, “but the pattern is complex and nuanced.”

Europe, already significantly secular in the 1970s, has undergone a further secular shift, but here the modest overall changes are far less striking than the dramatic differences from nation to nation.

One 1997 survey question found 1.9 percent of Greeks and 2.8 percent of Italians calling themselves [atheists](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/a/atheism/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier), compared with 24.3 percent of the French and 59.7 percent of East Germans. Those who said that they both believed in God and practiced their faith ranged from 5.5 percent in Denmark to 51.9 percent in Ireland.

One could surmise from this data a large historical drift continuing to push Europe away from religion, but much more important were all the swirls and countercurrents of local histories and circumstances distinguishing one nation from another.

The collapse of Communist rule in Eastern Europe 20 years ago opened a whole new landscape of religious change. After decades of repression, government constraints and ideological pressures on religion were lifted. Religion rebounded in some places; the drift away from it was merely slowed in others. Again, the report concludes, “there is no uniform post-Communist religious pattern.”

One 2005 survey found 90 percent of Romanians believing in a God understood as a “person,” compared with 16 percent of Estonians. A 2006 survey indicated that three out of four Poles prayed daily, compared to one out of eight Czechs. Poles are six times as likely to believe in an afterlife as East Germans.

The once-reigning assumption that religion necessarily declined with modernization has been dethroned, largely because of the American counterexample. But after looking at various measures of religiosity, on the one hand, and of per capita wealth, life expectancy and educational levels, on the other hand, the National Opinion Research Center report detects at least some life in this venerable “secularization thesis.”

“With more modernization in general and with more education in particular, religious beliefs and behaviors across countries do tend to decline,” the report states, and then promptly warns that these correlations are “moderate” and “many are not statistically significant.” Conclusion? “The relationship is neither overwhelming nor uniform across countries.”

Modernization is, of course, linked to scientific knowledge and progress.

The NORC report shows that compared with other college-educated workers, scientists, engineers and physicians are less likely to believe firmly in God, believe in an afterlife, pray daily and attend religious services weekly. But the report also points out that “the difference between them and those in nonscientific occupations is not especially large,” and in fact most of them remain religious, with large proportions believing in God, identifying with a religion, praying and attending services.

“In sum,” the report says, “the proposition that science leads people in general and scientists in particular away from religion is only weakly supported by the available evidence.”

Surveys of belief and practice are only one way of exploring religious change, but they have grown increasingly sophisticated. The NORC report comes on the heels of useful surveys examining in detail religious political activists on the right and the left; the growing number of Americans who do not identify with any religion; and congregations coping with declining church attendance and financial strains.

In the face of all this data, it is tempting to grasp for simplifying patterns: growth or decline, the religious United States or secular Europe, scientific modernity or traditional faith. The reports suggests that when it comes to tracking religious change, there is a strong case for suspending belief.

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