

Entering and Leaving the Ranks of the Unaffiliated

Becoming Unaffiliated

The biggest gains due to change in religious affiliation have been among those who say they are not affiliated with any particular faith. Overall, the 2007 “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” found that 16% of the adult population is unaffiliated, with the vast majority of this group (79%) reporting that they were raised in a religion as children. In total, more than one-in-ten American adults and more than a quarter of all those who have changed religions have become unaffiliated after having been raised as part of a religious group.

Religious Change Over the Life Cycle

The majority of both former Catholics (64%) and former Protestants (58%) who have become unaffiliated report having done so as adults. Among those who became unaffiliated as minors, most say it was mainly their own decision to do so rather than their parents’ choice.

Childhood Religion of the Unaffiliated

	%
Raised unaffiliated	21
Raised Protestant	44
<i>Largely evang. family of denominations*</i>	22
<i>Largely mainline family of denominations*</i>	17
<i>Protestant nonspecific</i>	5
Raised Catholic	27
Raised in other faith	8
	100
N	5,048

Source: 2007 “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey”

*Throughout this report, analyses of respondents’ *childhood* religion classifies Protestants into largely evangelical and largely mainline groups based on the *denominational family* (e.g., Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, etc.) in which they were raised. Largely evangelical families of denominations include Baptists, nondenominational Protestants, Pentecostals, Restorationists, Holiness Protestants, Adventists, Anabaptists and Pietists. Largely mainline families of denominations include Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans/Episcopalians, Congregationalists and Friends. Analyses of respondents’ *current* religion classifies Protestants into evangelical, mainline and historically black Protestant traditions based on the *specific denomination* to which the respondent currently belongs. See appendices to original “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” reports for details.

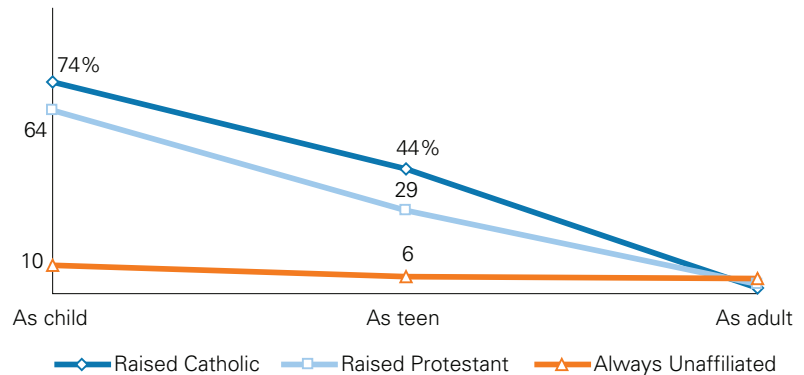
Among the currently unaffiliated, large majorities of both former Catholics and former Protestants report attending worship services at least once a week as children (74% and 64%, respectively). However, regular church attendance drops dramatically by adolescence for both groups, and very few unaffiliated people report regularly attending worship services now, as adults. Unaffiliated former Catholics and former Protestants are equally unlikely to say they regularly attend worship services as adults.

Only 30% of former Catholics and 18% of former Protestants who are now unaffiliated report that they had very strong faith as a child. All three unaffiliated groups (former Catholics, former Protestants and those who were raised unaffiliated) continue to express low levels of religious faith as adults.

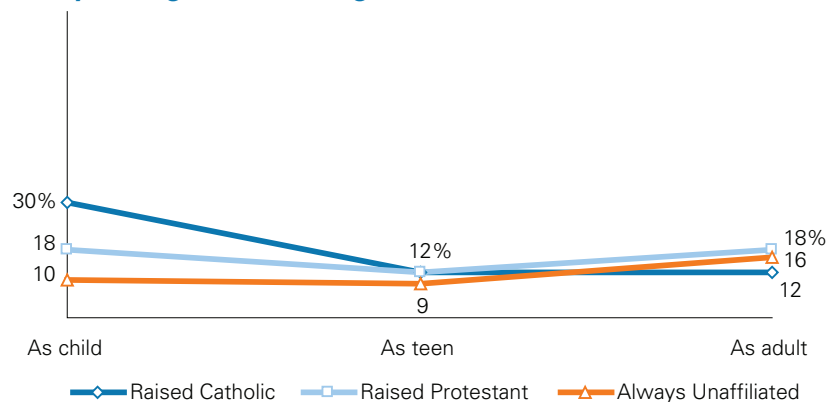
Former Catholics who are now unaffiliated are just as likely as lifelong Catholics to have participated in religious institutions and practices such as religious education classes (68% and 71%, respectively) and religious youth groups (32% for both groups). By contrast, just more than half of former Protestants who have become unaffiliated say they attended Sunday school, compared with roughly two-thirds of lifelong Protestants. And only about one-third of former Protestants who are now unaffiliated say they participated in religious youth groups (36%), compared with roughly half of lifelong Protestants.

Religious Attendance Among the Unaffiliated

% who attend worship services at least weekly



“Very Strong” Faith Among the Unaffiliated



Reasons for Becoming Unaffiliated

When asked whether a list of specific reasons were important factors in their decision to become unaffiliated, a significant proportion of those who have become unaffiliated after being raised in a religion say they simply do not believe in God or the religious teachings of most religions. About four-in-ten former Catholics and former Protestants who are now unaffiliated say this is an important reason they became unaffiliated.

Reasons People Become Unaffiliated

	Raised Catholic	Raised Protestant		
		All	Largely Evangelical	Largely Mainline
	%	%	%	%
Just do not believe in God/most religious teachings	42	39	30	46
Just have not yet found the right religion for them	33	38	40	38
Moved to a new community	9	11	16	7
Married someone unaffiliated	10	3	4	3
Someone they were close to passed away	7	7	8	6
Became separated or divorced	3	3	4	2
N	393	346	135	184

Respondents were asked whether or not each item was an important reason for joining their current religion and could answer “yes” to more than one reason. See Q.17a-Q.17j in survey topline for exact question wording.

Many of those who have become unaffiliated, however, remain open to the possibility that they could someday find a religion that suits them; roughly one-in-three agree they just have not yet found the right religion.

Very few people say they have become unaffiliated with religion in response to events going on in their lives, such as moving to a new community, getting married, losing a loved one or getting separated or divorced. Instead, strong majorities of those who have become unaffiliated say there are certain problems with religion, and most of those who identify these problems say they were important reasons they became unaffiliated. For instance, across all religious upbringings, roughly three-quarters of those who have become unaffiliated say religious people tend to be hypocritical and judgmental rather than sincere and forgiving. And most of these, including 55% of those raised Catholic and 53% of those raised Protestant, cite this as one of the reasons they became unaffiliated.

Three-in-four former Catholics (75%) and former Protestants (76%) who have become unaffiliated say that many religions are partly true but no religion is completely true. Most of those who agree

with this statement say this is an important reason they became unaffiliated, including 48% of former Catholics and 43% of former Protestants. About seven-in-ten (73% of former Catholics and 71% of former Protestants) say that religious organizations focus too much on rules and not enough on spirituality, with nearly half saying this is an important reason they became unaffiliated. A slightly smaller fraction of those who have become unaffiliated say that religious leaders are more concerned with money and power than they are with truth and spirituality, and about four-in-ten say this is an important reason they decided to become unaffiliated.

Views of Religion and Becoming Unaffiliated

	Raised Catholic	Raised Protestant		
		All	Largely Evangelical	Largely Mainline
<i>Agree that...</i>	%	%	%	%
Religious people are hypocritical/judgmental/insincere	74	76	78	74
<i>Important reason became unaffiliated</i>	55	53	57	48
Many religions are partly true, none completely true	75	76	76	73
<i>Important reason became unaffiliated</i>	48	43	47	35
Religious orgs. are too focused on rules, not spirituality	73	71	75	68
<i>Important reason became unaffiliated</i>	46	49	53	43
Relig. leaders want money/power, not truth/spirituality	66	64	69	61
<i>Important reason became unaffiliated</i>	43	38	45	31
Modern science proves religion is superstition	32	32	24	39
<i>Important reason became unaffiliated</i>	23	24	15	31
N	393	346	135	184

See Q.19a-Q.20e in survey topline for exact question wording.

In contrast to opinions on these questions, majorities of those who have become unaffiliated disagree with the idea that science proves religion is just superstition. Only 32% of former Catholics and the same percentage of former Protestants agree that science proves religion to be superstition, and fewer still (less than a quarter) say it was important in their conversion.

When asked to explain in their own words the *main* reason they chose to become unaffiliated, both former Catholics and former Protestants provide very similar answers. Among both groups, religious and moral beliefs are the reason most often cited for becoming unaffiliated; 49% of former Catholics and 45% of former Protestants say this. For example, one-fifth of former Catholics (20%) and more than one-in-ten former Protestants (12%) say they became unaffiliated because

they do not believe in their former religion (or in any religion). Criticisms of particular religious institutions, practices and people were somewhat less common (33% for former Catholics and 27% for former Protestants). Only 4% of former Catholics and 6% of former Protestants say they became unaffiliated mainly in response to things going on in their lives, such as marriage and family or relocation to a new community.

In Their Own Words - *Main Reasons for Becoming Unaffiliated*

	Raised Catholic	Raised Protestant
	%	%
Religious and moral beliefs	49	45
Agreement/Disagreement with religious teachings	44	42
<i>Do not believe in former religion/any religion</i>	20	12
<i>Religion/Previous religion not logical</i>	6	5
<i>Liked current religion's beliefs</i>	3	1
Agreement/Disagreement with moral/social teachings	4	3
Religious institutions, practices and people	33	27
Likes/Dislikes about organized religion	15	9
Likes/Dislikes about religion's rules, rigidity, etc.	10	8
Likes/Dislikes of particular churches/members/leaders	6	8
Lack/Presence of spiritual/social connectedness	2	2
Personal spirituality	13	16
Life cycle changes	4	6
Family reasons	3	2
<i>Marriage/Because of a spouse</i>	2	1
New circumstances	1	4
Other reasons	12	19
Don't know/Refused	7	6
N	393	346

Respondents were asked to describe in their own words the main reason for joining their current religion and could provide more than one reason. See Q.16 in survey topline for exact question wording.

Reasons for Leaving Childhood Religion

When asked a separate series of yes-or-no questions about why they left their childhood faith, more than seven-in-ten former Catholics and former Protestants (71% each) who are now unaffiliated say they just gradually drifted away from the faith, making this the most commonly offered reason by both groups. Many also say they left their former religion because they stopped believing in its teachings, with nearly two-thirds of unaffiliated former Catholics (65%) and half of unaffiliated former Protestants (50%) saying they left their childhood religion for this reason. Among both

groups, roughly four-in-ten say they departed their former faith because their spiritual needs were not being met. Roughly three-in-ten former Catholics (29%) and more than one-third of former Protestants (36%) were unhappy with their former religion's teachings about the Bible. Most of those who express concerns about the religion's teachings on the Bible say their former religion interpreted the Bible too literally, with only a few saying their former faith did not follow the Bible literally enough.

Many Unaffiliated Gradually Drifted Away or Stopped Believing Teachings

	Raised Catholic	Raised Protestant		
		All	Largely Evangelical	Largely Mainline
Common reasons among both former Catholics and former Protestants				
	%	%	%	%
Just gradually drifted away from the religion	71	71	74	65
Stopped believing in the religion's teachings	65	50	46	53
Spiritual needs not being met	43	39	38	39
Unhappy with teachings about the Bible	29	36	38	34
Dissatisfied with atmosphere at worship services	26	29	38	16
Common reasons among former Catholics				
Unhappy with teachings on abortion/homosexuality	56	23	21	21
Unhappy with teachings on birth control	48	--	--	--
Unhappy with way religion treated women	39	18	19	16
Unhappy with teachings on divorce/remarriage	33	9	12	3
Clergy sexual abuse scandal	27	--	--	--
Unhappy with rule that priests cannot marry	24	--	--	--
Unhappy with teachings on poverty/war/death penalty	24	15	15	13
Less common reasons among both groups				
Dissatisfied with clergy at congregation	18	25	26	21
Uncomfortable with feeling of community at congregation	19	20	25	17
Found a religion they liked more	10	11	13	10
Moved to a new community	10	10	12	10
Religion drifted too far from traditional practices such as Latin Mass	8	--	--	--
Someone they were close to passed away	7	9	12	8
Married someone from a different faith	13	4	3	6
Became separated or divorced	5	2	1	*
N	379	320	130	179

Respondents were asked whether or not each item was an important reason for leaving their former religion and could answer "yes" to more than one reason. Some items were asked only of people who were raised Catholic. See Q.4a-Q.4s in survey topline for exact question wording.

Most unaffiliated former Catholics (56%) say dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church's teachings about abortion and homosexuality contributed to their decision to leave, and about half (48%) say the same about the Catholic Church's position on birth control. Additionally, nearly four-in-ten say they left Catholicism because they were unhappy with the Catholic Church's treatment of women, and nearly as many (33%) express discontent with its teachings on divorce and remarriage. Roughly one-quarter of unaffiliated former Catholics name the clergy sexual abuse scandal, discontent with the Catholic Church's rule that priests cannot marry and dissatisfaction with church teachings on poverty, war and the death penalty as motivating factors for having left their childhood faith.

One-in-five unaffiliated former Catholics (19%) and former Protestants (20%) say they left their childhood religion because they were uncomfortable with the sense of community at their congregation. Interestingly, most former Protestants who take this view say their congregation was too close (13%), with too many people involved in other people's business, while fewer (4%) say there was not enough sense of community at their congregation. Among former Catholics, 10% say there was not enough feeling of community and 5% say their former parishes were too close, with too many people involved in others' private lives.

Concerns Over Sense of Community at Congregations Among Those Who Have Become Unaffiliated

	Raised Catholic	Raised Protestant		
		All	Largely Evangelical	Largely Mainline
	%	%	%	%
Uncomfortable with feeling of community at congregation	19	20	25	17
<i>Not enough sense of community</i>	10	4	5	4
<i>Too close/Too many minding others' business</i>	5	13	18	8
<i>Neither/Both/Other/Don't know (VOL)</i>	4	3	2	5
Did not leave former religion for this reason	81	80	75	83
	100	100	100	100
N	379	338	130	179

See Q.4n and Q.5n in survey topline for exact question wording.

Leaving the Ranks of the Unaffiliated

Paradoxically, the unaffiliated have gained the most members in the process of religious change despite having one of the lowest retention rates of all religious groups. Indeed, most people who were raised unaffiliated now belong to a religious group. Nearly four-in-ten of those raised unaffiliated have become Protestant (including 22% who now belong to evangelical denominations), 6% have become Catholic and 9% are now associated with other faiths. Overall, 4% of the total U.S. adult population now belongs to a religious group after having been raised unaffiliated.

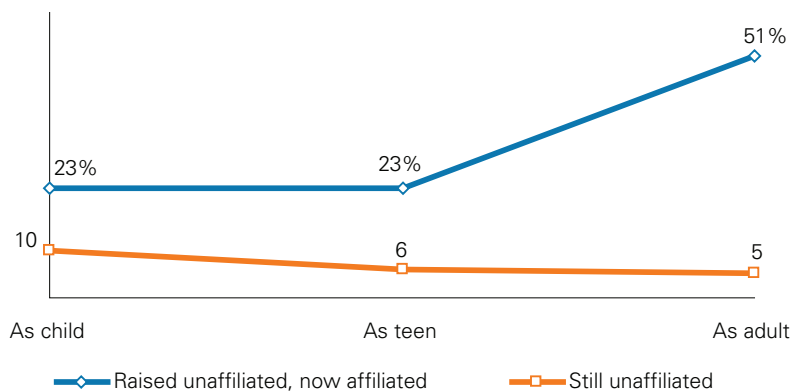
Almost one-third (32%) of those who have become religiously affiliated after an unaffiliated childhood joined their current faith as a minor, including 19% who did so before reaching age 13. But only 10% of those who have become affiliated with a religion after an unaffiliated childhood say it was mostly their parents' decision.

Compared with those who have remained unaffiliated, the formerly unaffiliated attended religious services more regularly as children and teenagers. Those raised unaffiliated who joined a faith are more than twice as likely as those who have remained unaffiliated to say they attended worship services at least once a week as a child (23% for those who have joined a religion vs. 10% for those who remain unaffiliated), and almost four times as likely to say they attended religious services regularly as a teenager (23% vs. 6%). While worship service attendance stayed very low into adulthood for those who remained unaffiliated, it more than doubled among those who joined a faith, up 28 percentage points from childhood and teenage years to 51% as adults.

Current Religion of Those Raised Unaffiliated	
	%
Still unaffiliated	46
Now Protestant	39
<i>Evangelical Prot. churches</i>	22
<i>Mainline Prot. churches</i>	13
<i>Hist. black Prot. churches</i>	4
Now Catholic	6
Now other faith	9
	100
<hr/>	
N	2,258
Source: 2007 "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey"	

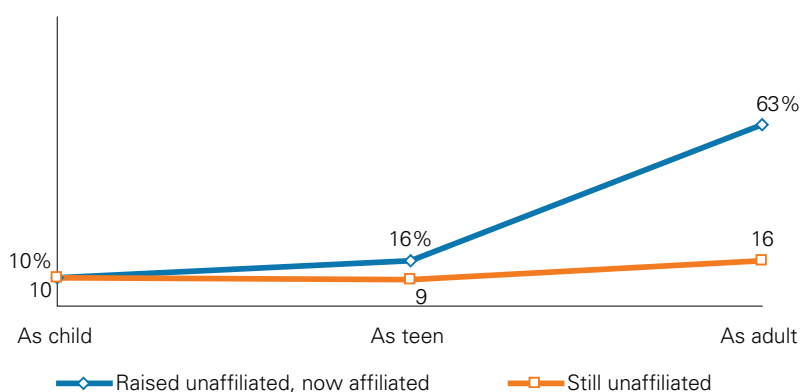
Religious Attendance Among Those Raised Unaffiliated

% who attend worship services at least weekly



Those raised in no religion who converted to a faith also experienced a great strengthening of faith from childhood to adulthood. Only 10% say they had very strong faith as a child (the same as those who stayed unaffiliated), but this grew 53 percentage points for those who are now affiliated, to 63% as adults, the largest increase for any group of converts or nonconverts.

“Very Strong” Faith Among Those Raised Unaffiliated



When asked whether a series of specific reasons helped lead to their first becoming affiliated with a religious group, most (51%) say they did so because their spiritual needs were not being met. Nearly as many (46%) say they found a religion they liked more than being unaffiliated. Far fewer cite life cycle reasons such as marriage (23%), moving to a new community (15%), losing a loved one (10%) or becoming separated or divorced (6%) as a reason for beginning to associate with a religion.

Reasons the Unaffiliated First Became Part of a Religious Group

Reason	%
Spiritual needs not being met	51
Found a religion they liked more	46
Married someone from a particular faith	23
Moved to a new community	15
Someone they were close to passed away	10
Became separated or divorced	6
N	313

Respondents were asked whether or not each item was an important reason for leaving their former religion and could answer “yes” to more than one reason. See Q.4a-Q.4s in survey topline for exact question wording.

As with other groups of converts, enjoying the services and style of worship of a new faith stands out as the reason most commonly cited for joining their current faith by those who were raised without any religious affiliation. Nearly three-quarters (74%) cite this as an important reason for their conversion. A majority of those raised unaffiliated (55%) say they felt called by God to join their current faith. Just over a quarter (29%) say they were attracted by a particular minister or pastor, and the same proportion say they were asked to join by a member of the religion.

Reasons for Joining Current Religion After Being Raised Unaffiliated

Reason	%
Enjoy the religious services and style of worship	74
Felt called by God	55
Attracted by a particular minister or pastor	29
Asked to join by a member of the religion	29
Married someone from the religion	25
Moved to a new community	17
Became separated or divorced	6
Someone they were close to passed away	6
N	327

Respondents were asked whether or not each item was an important reason for joining their current religion and could answer “yes” to more than one reason. See Q.17a-Q.17j in survey topline for exact question wording.

When asked about the *main* reason they joined their current faith, many (33%) of those raised unaffiliated mention liking things about religious institutions, organizations and people, such as feeling a connection with a particular church. Roughly one-in-four (26%) joined their faith because they agreed with its religious and moral teachings, with nearly as many (24%) volunteering that they joined their current religious group because something in their lives changed, such as marriage or other family reasons. One-fifth say they joined their current religion for personal spiritual reasons.

In Their Own Words – Main Reason Formerly Unaffiliated Joined Their Current Religion

Reason	%
Religious and moral beliefs	26
Religious teachings	25
<i>Liked religion's beliefs</i>	17
<i>Biblical/Scriptural reason</i>	7
Moral/Social teachings	1
Religious institutions, practices and people	33
Particular churches/members/leaders	14
Spiritual/Social connectedness	19
Personal spirituality	20
Looking for something/Seeking answers	3
Saved/Accepted Jesus/Born again	4
Life cycle changes	24
Family reasons	21
<i>Marriage/Because of a spouse</i>	13
New circumstances	3
Other reasons	11
Don't know/Refused	2
N	327

Respondents were asked to describe in their own words the main reason for joining their current religion and could provide more than one reason. See Q.16 in survey topline for exact question wording.