

# *Fading Faith: The Rise of the Secular Age*

By James A. Haught

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A HUGE NEWS STORY, BARELY NOTICED  
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Philosopher-historian Will Durant called it "the basic event of modern times." He didn't mean the world wars, or the end of colonialism, or the rise of electronics. He was talking about the decline of religion in Western democracies.

The great mentor saw subsiding faith as the most profound occurrence of the past century -- a shift of Western civilization, rather like former transitions away from the age of kings, the era of slavery and such epochs.

Since World War II, worship has dwindled starkly in Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan and other advanced democracies. In those busy places, only 5 or 10 percent of adults now attend church. Secular society scurries along heedlessly.

Pope Benedict XVI protested: "Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner unknown before now to humanity, excludes God from the public conscience." Columnist George Will called the Vatican "109 acres of faith in a European sea of unbelief."

America seems an exception. This country has 350,000 churches whose members donate \$100 billion per year. The United States teems with booming megachurches, gigantic sales of "Rapture" books, fundamentalist attacks on evolution, hundred-million-dollar TV ministries, talking-in-tongues Pentecostals, the white evangelical "religious right" attached to the Republican Party, and the like.

But quietly, under the radar, much of America slowly is following the path previously taken by Europe. Little noticed, secularism keeps climbing in the United States. Here's the evidence:

| Rising "nones." Various polls find a strong increase in the number of Americans -- especially the young -- who answer "none" when asked their religion. In 1990, this group had climbed to 8 percent, and by 2008, it had doubled to 15 percent -- plus another 5 percent who answer "don't know." This implies that around 45 million U.S. adults today lack church affiliation. In Hawaii, more than half say they have no church connection.

| Mainline losses. America's traditional Protestant churches -- "tall steeple" denominations with seminary-trained clergy -- once dominated U.S. culture. They were the essence of America. But their membership is collapsing. Over the past half-century, while the U.S. population doubled, United Methodists fell from 11 million to 7.9 million, Episcopalians dropped from 3.4 million to 2 million, the Presbyterian Church USA sank from 4.1 million to 2.2 million, etc. The religious journal *First Things* -- noting that mainline faiths dwindled from 50 percent of the adult U.S. population to a mere 8 percent -- lamented that "the Great Church of America has come to an end." A researcher at the Ashbrook think-tank dubbed it "Flatline Protestantism."

| Catholic losses. Although Hispanic immigration resupplies U.S. Catholicism with replacements, many former adherents have drifted from the giant church. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey found that 20 million Americans have quit Catholicism -- thus one-tenth of U.S. adults now are ex-Catholics.

| Fading taboos. A half-century ago, church-backed laws had power in America. In the 1950s, it was a crime to look at the equivalent of a *Playboy* magazine or R-rated movie -- or for stores to open on the Sabbath -- or to buy a cocktail or lottery ticket -- or to sell birth-control devices in some states -- or to be homosexual -- or to terminate a pregnancy -- or to read a sexy novel -- or for

an unwed couple to share a bedroom. Now all those morality laws have fallen, one after another. Currently, state after state is legalizing gay marriage, despite church outrage.

Sociologists are fascinated by America's secular shift. Dr. Robert Putnam of Harvard, author of "Bowling Alone," found as many as 40 percent of young Americans answering "none" to faith surveys. "It's a huge change, a stunning development," he said. "That is the future of America." He joined Dr. David Campbell of Notre Dame in writing a new book, "American Grace," that outlines the trend. Putnam's Social Capital site sums up: "Young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of five to six times the historic rate."

Oddly, males outnumber females among the churchless. "The ratio of 60 males to 40 females is a remarkable result," the 2008 ARIS poll reported. "These gender patterns correspond with many earlier findings that show women to be more religious than men."

Growing secularism has political implications. The Republican Party may suffer as the white evangelical "religious right" shrinks. In contrast, burgeoning "nones" tend to vote Democratic. Sociologist Ruy Teixeira says the steady rise of the unaffiliated, plus swelling minorities, means that "by the 2016 election (or 2020 at the outside) the United States will have ceased to be a white Christian nation. Looking even farther down the road, white Christians will be only around 35 percent of the population by 2040, and conservative white Christians, who have been such a critical part of the Republican base, will be only about a third of that -- a minority within a minority."

Gradually, decade by decade, religion is moving from the advanced First World to the less-developed Third World. Faith retains enormous power in Muslim lands. Pentecostalism is booming in Africa and South America. Yet the West steadily turns more secular.

Arguably, it's one of the biggest news stories during our lives -- although most of us are too busy to notice. Durant may have been correct when he wrote that it is the basic event of modern times.

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