

PEW SURVEY: MEET THE "WHATEVERS"

Recently, the Pew Research Center released a survey on religion. The bad news has already dominated media reports: more Americans are religiously unaffiliated than ever before. The ranks of Protestants and Catholics are declining, and the percentage of atheists and agnostics are increasing. This is true across age groups, though it is most pronounced among young people. But not all the data were discouraging.

While it is true that the Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, some quick arithmetic shows that more than 92 percent of Americans who identify with a religion are Christian (76.5 percent are religiously affiliated and 70.6 percent of them are Christian). To that extent, we are still a Christian nation.

Also, those raised without a religious affiliation have a low retention rate. Indeed, nearly half of them, 47 percent, are not content to stay unaffiliated; they join a religion at some point. In other words, while those with no affiliation are growing, the increase is attributable to those who were raised in a religious household and have decided to leave. Some of those who exit come back when they get married and have children, though apparently not as many as in previous decades.

Only 21 percent of those who are currently unaffiliated were raised that way, so they depend largely on alienated Christians to bolster their numbers. At the other extreme are Catholics: 90 percent of those who identify as Catholic today were raised Catholic. But among those who have no religious affiliation, 28 percent are former Catholics. This suggests that while Catholicism does a better job holding its own (as compared to other religions), the ranks of the disaffected are

a serious issue.

Most of those with no religious affiliation are neither atheist or agnostic: the majority of them identify as “nothing in particular” (some of whom are believers). They might best be called the “Whatever” generation. Look for many of the “Whatevers” to eventually get anchored, though a large number of them are lost souls.