

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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Pentecost, Acts 2:1-21

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

George Gallup's legacy organization has polled Americans about their membership in houses of worship every year since 1937.ⁱ In that first survey, 73% of Americans reported they belonged to a church, a synagogue, or a mosque ... 73%. In the decades that follow, the poll's simple line graph of annual results descends like a driveway well graded to wash easily into the street without becoming an icy hassle during wintertime: from a carport-door high of 76% immediately following World War II, the line declines gently to a curb of 70% in the mid-Seventies.

For the next quarter-century, the graph becomes more like the design on Charlie Brown's shirt, with sharp-edges pointing up and down, yet remaining mostly strong to a *final* peak of 70% in 1999. Since then? An EKG of the dying: with only a few upward gasps, the line moves laterally two or three times before plummeting through 64% to 61% ... 57, 55, 50 ... until, 2020 when only 47% of Americans claim membership in a faith community, and – for the first time since the inception of Gallup's survey – a majority of Americans do not self-identify as belonging to any particular faith.ⁱⁱ

Appreciate the remarkable pace of this shift: the change in reported membership during the last 21 years – roughly the length of Tom Brady's careerⁱⁱⁱ – is nearly *eight times* greater than the decline experienced over the nearly 70 years previous:^{iv} a 3-point decline over seven decades, followed by a 23-point decline over the next two.

Interpreting this precipitous drop through its data, Gallup views the results as the consequence of individuals' changing attitudes. That is, the philosophical and theological, ideological and cultural shifts of the last 88 years voice themselves through the changes in reported "preferences" for religion. Two primary factors have driven the decline: one, an increase in those who express no particular faith (the "Nones," so-called); and, two, a decrease in institutional affiliation among those who *do* claim a religious preference.

These surveys and their analysis make for easily affirmable headlines to sip with our morning coffee (indeed, perhaps enjoyed during a Sunday brunch) ... yet, while Gallup maps the *fact* of church-membership's decline – effectively tracking its topography over time – the organization does not suggest *why*. *Why* do so many Americans express no religious preference? *Why* are an increasing number of self-identified Christians, Jews, and Muslims not affiliating with a particular church, synagogue, or mosque. *Why?*

Today, we Christians mark fifty days after the feast of the Passover and our celebration of Easter. We recall that upper room two thousand years ago, congested with all the believers in the risen Christ pressing against one another. When, like thunder from heaven, a noise as loud and strong as a tornado split that thick air, and a *presence* surrounded and filled every small space in the crowd. “Divided tongues, as of fire,” emerged from this presence and came to rest on those gathered, until, impossibly, the community began speaking and hearing in one another’s native languages.^v “Amazement and perplexity” ensued, as well as the sneering suggestion, “They are filled with new wine.”^{vi}

All of this inspires Peter, who stands and reassures the crowd of the disciples’ sobriety: “People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem ... these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.”^{vii} He continues, quoting the beatific vision of the prophet Joel: “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your [young] shall see visions, and your [old] shall dream dreams ... [and in those days] before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” ... *everyone*.^{viii}

Bedecked in red these millennia later, the scene still excites our imagination, still inspires us to stand and venture prophesy. Yet, making account of Pentecost’s promise in the light of our contemporary American condition inevitably asks: was Peter wrong? Was Joel misguided? Has the “Lord’s great and glorious day” already passed? Or have the Holy Spirit’s fires extinguished, a half-smoked, wet cigarette washing beyond the curb of Gallup’s graph and down the drain of our changed religious “preferences”?

That renown theological journal *The Economist* (“renown theological journal” ... that’s a joke, friends) dares offer causes of the faith membership decline: “more [Americans] claim to have ‘no religion’ than to be either Catholic or evangelical Christian. Yet, unlike European countries, America is *not* becoming clearly less devotional as its churches retreat. Even Americans who have abandoned churchgoing are likely to say they pray and believe in God more than German or British Christians.”^{ix}

“[Therefore, Americans] have rejected the institutions of religion, but not the religious urge.” Observing a redirection of this “yearning for moral [clarity] and communal identity,” the author proposes “**America’s national debate has taken on a religious complexion[: righteous, moralistic, unforgiving, and fervently adhered to] in both parties ...**”^x

That is, we Americans are no less devout, we’ve simply chosen a new religion: *partisan politics*.^{xi} Even those of us with no (traditional) religious affiliation – those of us who have abandoned churchgoing altogether – we still pray more than many professing Christians in Europe. Yet instead of gathering at an altar for the creator of heaven and earth – the very Power of Love above and beyond ourselves – we kneel before the democratic process, believing that only our vote has the power to accomplish the world’s salvation.

On the right, “This pseudo-religious makeover ... was instigated by lapsed white evangelicals ... Their continued self-identification as Christians, though they do not attend church, is often a proxy for ethno-nationalism.” *The Economist* argues.^{xiii} The same religious appropriation is evident among Europe’s [so-called] Christian nationalists, who often do not even believe in God. Yet on the American right, unlike Europe’s, it has received mainstream backing. Christian leaders, confusing the decline of their congregations with the cultural threat of liberalism, made common cause with pseudo-evangelicals. For partisan reasons, the rest of the Republican coalition followed them. The party has never been more avowedly Christian or more clearly out of line with gospel doctrines.”^{xiii}

Much of the so-called “Christian right,” then, is not Christian at all. Rather, these “pseudo-evangelicals” convene hyper-partisan political conventions in buildings that happen to have steeples, with white men in robes preaching a gospel of bank-account prosperity and “border security.” Professing a political platform, rather than any Confession or Creed, they swear loyalty to conservative pundits who cherry-pick our scriptures, rather than prophets who interrogate our civics.

By and large, we Episcopalians nod eager and enthusiastic approval of cataloguing “the Christian right’s” ruinous influence. They make us – we *progressive* Christians – look bad. So we add a Southern accent to its preachers of capitalist convenience, and, painting with a pleurably broad brush, we regionalize their devotees to separate them from ourselves. In our best Anglican solemn tone, we praise God for *our* geography ... *our* dignity ... and *our* erudition.

Yet, “The most avowedly secular Democrats – well-educated ... liberals – are also the likeliest to moralize,” *The Economist* argues. “Their Puritanical racial and gender politics sit in a long tradition of progressive Utopianism, rooted in mainstream Protestantism ... Yet these new Puritans of the left [are] more secular than earlier progressives, are far more extreme. Their view of social justice has no place for forgiveness or grace ... It is also more focused on purity and atonement within the liberal tribe ... than making society less discriminatory.”

Lord, have mercy: while the Christian right may have “confused the decline of *their* congregations with the cultural threat of liberalism,” we of the Christian left have invested in Democratic politics as a church-growth strategy,^{xiv} believing that puritanical atheism would keep us culturally relevant, even righteous. But as Gallup has tracked, that strategy has failed. Clearly. Miserably. *Utterly*. Yet we nonsensically point to our shrinking congregations as signs of our purity, as though our inability to get along with other humans demonstrates our righteousness and God’s favor. God’s favor? Offended by the exclusivism of the evangelical Church, we have only created our own graceless gospel – scarcely more rooted in the ministry of Jesus than theirs – one seeking to prove *us* as singularly worthy of God’s attention ... all this not only at the cost of people in our pews, but the welfare of our nation’s collective soul.

Yet, thanks be to God, the way things are, is not the way things must be.

People of Trinity Church, the power of Peter's preaching endures!

Joel's ecstatic dream remains before us!

And should we dare gather in a spirit of Love beyond all that divides us – all of us, “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and the residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs”^{xv} – and, humbly, seek the mystery of the living Christ *in one another* ... not in our own righteousness, but *in one another* ... then that smoldering Pentecost fire *will* come. Hot and heavy thunder from heaven, loud and strong as a tornado, that Holy Spirit will come and make kindling of all that aches our hearts –

our fears of rejection and exposure;

our mortal terror for our safety and for the safety of those we love;

our anxieties about our frailties and our worthiness;

our despair before inequities that seem intractable and unchangeable;

our disappointments in ourselves and in our world;

our numbness to curiosity and our distraction from creativity;

our guilt for what we enjoy and for what we take for granted;

our hard-heartedness toward those with whom we disagree;

our regrets about what could have done, about what we should have done –

on this Pentecost Sunday, the Holy Spirit of God wicks ready to make ashes of all these sufferings! Hearing one another in our native tongues, with grace and not judgement; ceding condescension and seeking, instead, understanding; speaking authentically and listening generously; the creator of heaven and earth – the very Power of Love above and beyond ourselves and our indignations – will fuse our hearts' fissures and make us whole ... 47%, or 73%, whatever% ... make us, all of us, *whole*.

Investing joyful, life-affirming, life-giving time with one another; offering unconditional Love to one another; encouraging in one another a *consequential* hope – a *Gospel of Jesus* hope! – the kind that begins movements, that makes a difference beyond ballot-box initiatives, that changes history's course ... the kind of hope that inspires our “sons' and daughters' prophesy, that inspires the visions of our young, that inspires the dreams of our old ... the kind of hope that will receive the Lord's great and glorious day when everyone – *everyone* – who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Come, Holy Spirit, come:
and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful,
the fire of your Love.

Amen.

ⁱ Jones, Jeffrey M. “[U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority For First Time](#).” *gallup.com*. March 29, 2021. I draw all the history and statistics that follow from this Gallup release of their survey’s 2020 results.

ⁱⁱ Of its methodology, Gallup explains that, twice each year, it “asks Americans a battery of questions on their religious attitudes and practices.” To analyze trends over the last two decades, the organization then collected annual results into three-year aggregates: from 1998-2000, when membership averaged 69%; 2008-2010, when membership averaged 62%; and the most recent decennial, three-year aggregate from 2018-2020, when membership averaged only 49%.

ⁱⁱⁱ (annoyingly-yet-inescapably great).

^{iv} Perhaps this correlation with Brady implies causation ...

^v Acts 2:3-4.

^{vi} Acts 2:12-13.

^{vii} Acts 2:15.

^{viii} Acts 2:16-21 (Joel 2:28-32).

^{ix} “Religious Fervour Is Migrating Into Politics.” *The Economist*. March 27, 2021. Strangely, the article lists no author – perhaps a warning to preachers who would choose to preach its ideas!

^x *Ibid.* I reverse the order of clauses in the quoted sentence, though the sentiment remains the same.

^{xi} Also from the article: “A new academic paper notes that since 2018, American Twitter users have been likelier to identify themselves by partisan affiliation than religion.”

^{xii} *Ibid.*

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} Gallup’s regional data supports this claim.

^{xv} I LOVE this catalogue so much. We read it every year on Pentecost, and the list has come to offer its own entrancing rhythm. Who’s there? *Everybody’s there.*