

The Future of the Religious Denominations in the United States to 2043

Extended Abstract

This study provides the first ever cohort-component projection of the main religious groups in the United States. It is based on the General Social Survey, census immigration statistics and Pew small religious group data and projects the size of religious groups to 2043. Two principal axes of debate may be identified in the social scientific literature on religion. The ethnoreligious school emphasizes the importance of religious groups as ascribed social collectivities. The religious restructuring or 'culture wars' paradigm contends that what really counts are measures of theological traditionalism or modernism which cut across major religious groups. This perspective views ethnoreligious boundaries as in demise and foresees a polarization of the population along traditionalist vs. modernist lines.

Our work unearths key findings which support elements of both paradigms. In terms of ethnoreligious trends, we find considerable stability of religious groups over time. Hispanic Catholics experience the strongest growth rates. Immigration, high fertility and a young age structure will enable this group to expand from 10 to 18 percent of the American population between 2003 and 2043, despite a net loss of communicants to other groups. This will power the growth of Catholics as a whole, and they will surpass Protestants by mid-century if losses from conversion are stanching or immigration doubles. In any event, Catholics will outnumber Protestants within the youngest age cohorts by 2043. This represents a historic moment for a country settled by anti-Catholic Puritans, whose Revolution was motivated in part by a desire to spread dissenting Protestantism and whose population on the eve of revolution was 98 percent Protestant. Another important development concerns the growth of the Muslim population and decline of the Jews. High Muslim fertility and a young Muslim age structure contrasts with low Jewish childbearing levels and a mature Jewish age structure. However, migration is the most important factor in Muslim growth in the coming decades. Therefore, barring an unforeseen shift in the religious composition and size of the immigrant flow, Muslims will surpass Jews in the population by 2023 and the electorate by 2028. Only an improbable shift in immigration policy or in fertility patterns could forestall this demographic shift, which could have profound effects on the course of American foreign policy. Within the non-Hispanic white population, we expect to see continued Liberal Protestant decline due to low fertility and a net deficit in conversion. White Catholics will also lose due to a net outflow of converts. Fundamentalist and Moderate Protestant denominations will hold their own within the white population, but are set to decline as a component of the national total.

Our work also sheds light on elements of the religious restructuring paradigm, though we do not find a clear victor between secularism and fundamentalism. First of all, the secular population will grow substantially, largely because of religious apostasy and the young age structure of the secular population. The sharpest gains for secularism will be found within the white population, but the low fertility of secular

Americans and the religiosity of the immigrant inflow provide a countervailing force which will cause the secularization process within the total population to plateau before 2043. This represents an important theoretical point in that demography can overpower the social forces driving secularism. We also find evidence for second demographic transition effects in that fertility differentials between those holding traditionalist and modernist attitudes on the questions of abortion and homosexuality

are substantial and appear to be growing wider. These fertility differentials are more impressive than the analogous differences between Fundamentalist and Liberal Protestants. Those of 'other' race (Hispanic and Asian) are more traditional than the average American on questions of abortion and homosexuality. Younger Americans are more modernist on the homosexuality question, though not on questions pertaining to abortion. Nonreligious Americans are more modernist on all questions. The blend of these rising segments produces stability on the homosexuality issue and a slight increase in the proportion opposed to abortion. However, in the very long run, i.e. to 2100, the fertility advantage of traditionalists points toward a more conservative society. This of course assumes no significant exogenous cultural changes take place during the twenty-first century. Given that we cannot predict exogenous cultural change, these projections provide a useful baseline for exploring the future of the American religious landscape.

Political scientists have established important relationships between membership in ethnoreligious groups and voting behaviour. Our work would suggest that Democratic-leaning ethnoreligious groups will grow in the decades ahead. However, from a religious restructuring perspective, the balance in the culture wars will remain stable or swing slightly toward the traditionalist side, powered by Hispanic immigration and higher conservative fertility. All of which should reinforce the historic American pattern whereby the median voter identifies as a conservative Democrat.