



After the Fact | [Rising Spirituality](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

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Patty Van Cappellen, Duke University: If we're thinking about when we travel to beautiful places, when we see a beautiful sunset on the beach, visit a national park, welcoming your child into the world—those are very profoundly positive and meaningful experiences. They create a yearning for growth, for something more.

Dan LeDuc, host: A yearning for something more is usually behind people's devotion to their religious faith and their sense of spirituality. Patty Van Cappellen is a psychologist at Duke University who studies those motivations, and we'll hear more from her in a few minutes.

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But first, the data—because this is “After the Fact,” and in each episode of this podcast that's where we start. I'm Dan LeDuc from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the data point this time is 59 percent. That's the number of Americans who say they regularly feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being—well over half of the U.S. population.

What's particularly interesting is that while that number has grown in recent years, the percentage of Americans who believe in God, pray daily, or regularly attend church is actually down slightly. So we start this episode with Greg Smith from the Pew Research Center to explain those trends.

We're here to talk today about religion and spirituality, which sounds like very similar things, but you've got some interesting findings from the Pew Research Center that has people viewing those things maybe a little differently. Give us the numbers that help explain what I'm trying to get at here.

Greg Smith, associate director, Pew Research Center: It's very interesting. There are some big religious changes underway in the American religious landscape. Most notably, the country seems to be growing modestly but noticeably less religious in a variety of ways. The share of

Americans who say they have no particular religious affiliation—who describe themselves as atheist or agnostic or as just nothing in particular when it comes to religion—those folks are growing. Meanwhile, the share of Americans who say that they believe in God or that they see themselves as very religious people, the share of Americans who say they attend religious services regularly, the share of Americans who say they pray every day—all of those numbers are down a little bit.

That does not necessarily mean that we're seeing a decrease in levels of spirituality. In fact, the share of Americans who say they regularly feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being—those numbers are going up. So you've got this interesting situation where the country is growing modestly but noticeably less religious in a variety of ways, but not necessarily becoming less spiritual.

Dan LeDuc: I find that fascinating because, I don't know, you feel like those subjects are so intertwined. Let's take a step back and help explain how we even know this stuff. How do you folks at the Pew Research Center come up with this data? And how did you come up with the questionnaires that got us to this point?

Greg Smith: Of course—well, there's a variety of different ways to go about researching religion in public life, religion in the United States. The way we tend to do it at the Pew Research Center, in this case, is we've conducted several large-scale national surveys. Now, we've done two of these big religious landscape studies. We did the first one in 2007, and then we repeated the same study, or much of the same material, again in 2014.

Dan LeDuc: That lets you show progress over time and all that sort of stuff.

Greg Smith: That's exactly right.

Dan LeDuc: But let folks know the scope of this. I mean, we're not talking to a dozen people on the street.

Greg Smith: Not at all. These are huge studies. Both religious landscape studies, both the one in 2007 and the one in 2014, each consisted of interviews with more than 35,000 people from all across the United States. And in our 2014 study, we took special steps to make sure that we got at least 300 interviews from people in every single state. So these really are big, important representations of what's happening with respect to religion in the United States.

Dan LeDuc: So give us a little more context about the U.S. We talk about religiosity sort of starting to show a slowdown. But this is still a pretty religious country.

Greg Smith: It's a very religious country. It's important to realize that the vast majority of Americans are believers. Nine in 10 Americans say that they believe in God. Most Americans say

that they pray every day and that religion is very important in their lives. About half say that they attend religious services at least once or twice a month. So there's no question that the United States is a very religious country. It remains a nation of believers. It's much more religious than many countries in much of the rest of the industrialized world—much more religious on average, say, than many countries in Western Europe.

Dan LeDuc: What's driving it? I mean, I've been reading a lot about generations in recent months. And that's got to be playing a role as millennials come more and more into the fore.

Greg Smith: There's no question about it. Generational replacement is a big part of what's happening. It's a big part of what's behind the religious changes we see occurring in the United States.

Dan LeDuc: So what do we mean by generational replacement?

Greg Smith: What we mean is this: You have older cohorts of Americans—baby boomers, people from the silent generation—who overwhelmingly identify as Christians and who, by and large, are quite devout. And what's happening is that as members of those generations get older, and as they begin to pass away, they are being replaced by a new generation of young people—by millennials—who are coming of age, who are entering adulthood with far lower levels of attachment to religion as compared with their parents and their grandparents before them.

So we can see in the data, for example, that among millennials—among adults who are in their 20s and 30s today—something like one-third of them, maybe more, say they have no particular religious affiliation at all. And they are less likely to say that religion is a very important part of their lives. They're less likely to say that they pray regularly. And they're less likely to attend religious services on a regular basis. That's a big change. And their emergence into adulthood, into the adult population, is a big part of what's driving these religious trends.

But there's another very important point that's worth making when we think about religious change in the United States. We know that the size of the population in the United States is growing. And so what you can have is—you can have a situation in which the number of highly religious people isn't actually changing very much, but the share that they constitute in the overall population is declining because there are so many more people who are not particularly religious.

Dan LeDuc: How much of your research into that segment of it was spurred by the fact that religiosity seems to be going down? Did you begin to probe for other things that people might be turning to? Or were you always sort of looking at that subject of spirituality?

Greg Smith: It's something that we've been interested in for a long time. But it is certainly the case that as the share of the public that is religious has declined, it sort of naturally raises a question: If people are not turning to religion to find meaning and purpose and fulfillment in their lives, well then, what is substituting for religion? Where are they looking to find that kind of meaning and fulfillment and purpose?

Dan LeDuc: On the spiritual side, what do you probe for to get a sense of someone when they say that they have a sense of spirituality? What are the things you ask about?

Greg Smith: Well we've asked a number of questions to try to tap into these measures of spirituality. Most recently, in our big religious landscape surveys, we've asked people how often they feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being. We've asked people how often they feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe. Separately, in other surveys, we've asked people in a straightforward way, "Do you think of yourself as a spiritual person or not?" We've also asked in other surveys about certain kinds of spiritual practices like meditation. How often do you meditate?

Dan LeDuc: So what are you finding on things like that?

Greg Smith: We find that lots of Americans say they meditate. And here again, it's an interesting pattern whereby we see that meditation is actually especially common among people who also say they pray regularly.

Dan LeDuc: That's like spirituality and religiosity, prayer and meditation. There are some relationships and dichotomies among all these phrases.

Greg Smith: That's exactly right. There's something very interesting to point out, though. Even as the country grows somewhat less religious, we've seen that there's also evidence that it's simultaneously becoming more spiritual. We see increased numbers of people saying they regularly feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being. So this change, this growth in spirituality, is seen among many groups, including young adults.

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Dan LeDuc: So there's a lot to unpack on this subject. We turn now to Patty Van Cappellen to explore *why* people seek religion or spirituality in their lives. As an experimental social psychologist and principal investigator at the Belief, Affect, and Behavior Lab at Duke University, she studies just that.

Patty Van Cappellen: Yeah, well, there are so many people across the world who apparently believe in a god or a higher power, or who define themselves as a spiritual person. So it seems very important for psychologists to better understand, how these beliefs really impact people's

lives. And we know from the research that these beliefs do impact people's lives. They predict things as important as health and well-being, as feeling connected with others. So it is important for us to understand: How do these beliefs do that and what are the long-term implications for people.

Dan LeDuc: So it's beyond sort of a mental sense of joy in the world or something—that this can translate into our physical well-being, too.

Patty Van Cappellen: Yeah, there is research showing that religion predicts longevity and better health outcomes. One potential explanation is very simply that religion promotes a set of healthy habits—so not drinking too much, for example. That is one way through which religion may create these, you know, health outcomes.

Dan LeDuc: So how do you do what you do? I mean, when we were talking with Greg, he's a survey expert. He knows, they call up people on the phone, they ask them some questions, and they get a very baseline sort of set of data that says, "Yes, I go to church" or "No, I don't." But you're trying to go a lot deeper than that, and how do you do that?

Patty Van Cappellen: In one of the research [studies] we did to try to understand why religion promotes well-being, what we did is that we went to different churches on the same Sunday, and we asked people to complete a questionnaire. And we asked them, you know, how much positive emotion did you feel while attending this Sunday service? How much connected did you feel to the other members of your church? And how much meaning do you derive from attending this service? And then we also asked them more general questions about their life satisfaction, optimism, and other measures of well-being.

What we found is that the more people say that they felt positive emotions while attending church, the greater well-being they were reporting, even above and beyond how connected they felt or how much meaning they were deriving from attending the service.

Dan LeDuc: As a psychologist, it's got to be interesting for you. I mean, those are two really different things, right? If you're attending a religious service frequently, the benefit is being with others. You want to keep people social. It's good for their well-being. Yet when you're talking about spiritual practices, it seems like you're talking a lot about things you do alone—with the meditation or prayer—that people may do in the quiet of their own home or wherever else they choose to do it.

Patty Van Cappellen: What I think is interesting with both religion and spirituality is that they can provide a sort of package of a lot of different strategies that have been shown to promote well-being and life satisfaction. And people can kind of choose what they want. I think that's what we're observing more and more, is that they start choosing the practice that fits best

with, you know, their own personality and what they are trying to look for in a religion or spirituality.

Dan LeDuc: Step away from your direct work in your lab, which is so important, but give us the overview, say, of the last few decades of research on this topic. What are the trends in this broader topic that you study?

Patty Van Cappellen: Think about the personal experiences we all had during our lives, or even during our weeks, that push us toward religious and spiritual beliefs, that make them more salient. What a lot of research has shown is that religion represents a way that people can cope with difficult life events. So let's take some examples to kind of better understand what I'm talking about here.

Imagine you've just faced a natural disaster, and it feels as if the world is uncontrollable and unsafe. Or you've just lost your job, and you face economic insecurity. You've just lost a loved one. Those are moments during which the belief that there is something more to this world can be really helpful.

Dan LeDuc: A lot of the research that I've been reading in recent years is more about the sense of awe that people might feel, and this sense of need for growth; it feels like that's almost a different approach to how people might view their spirituality or faith.

Patty Van Cappellen: I totally agree. My own work is actually focusing on these more positive and meaningful experiences that also seem to promote a sense of religion and spirituality. If we're thinking about when we travel to beautiful places, when we see a beautiful sunset on the beach, visit a national park, seeing the joy of other people across the globe, seeing, for example, how much people can help each other after disasters or other events, welcoming your child into the world—those are like very profoundly positive and meaningful experiences. They create a yearning for growth, for something more, and I think many people kind of express this desire for transcendence, growth, by turning to a religion or spirituality.

Dan LeDuc: How do you learn about that in your lab?

Patty Van Cappellen: Yeah, so in our research, we bring people to the lab, and we kind of divide them into different groups, and we ask them to think about a time when they had a very profound positive emotion or experience. And the emotions we're targeting are emotions such as awe, admiration, gratitude, elevation—which is this emotion you feel when you see someone helping another person, and you're thinking like, oh, the world is a beautiful place. What we find is that when people just remember a time when they felt these emotions, or when we show them video clips that are eliciting these emotions, we find that people report greater spirituality, greater belief that life is meaningful, that there is benevolence in the world,

than compared to people who just watched kind of a neutral film clip or remember kind of a neutral event in their life. You have this feeling that life is meaningful, and all of this creates a certain mindset that sets the conditions for people's religious and spiritual beliefs to become salient.

Dan LeDuc: There are real benefits to our well-being about how we view our spiritual life. I imagine they generate a lot of positive emotions. What are you finding in your lab?

Patty Van Cappellen: We do find that both identifying as a religious person or spiritual person seems to be associated with feeling more positive emotions on a daily basis. And we also find that practices associated with religion or spirituality—like attending church or meditating, or praying—do increase positive emotions such as awe, love, peace, and gratitude.

Dan LeDuc: And does it change your sort of worldview? Do you sort of see things in a bigger, grander way?

Patty Van Cappellen: So when people feel positive emotions—and especially these self-transcendent positive emotions such as awe or admiration—that changes the way they see the world. So they start seeing the bigger picture, and they start really connecting different experiences in their life. One example—to kind of understand the difference between negative emotions and positive emotions in how we approach the world—can be to think about, if you're in the forest attacked by a bear. So when you're attacked by a bear and you feel kind of fearful of that bear, you better focus on the bear rather than the forest. Focusing on the forest is not going to help you escape the bear. So when we feel negative emotions, we have a very focused attention, focused on the source of threat. And we're trying to find solutions to cope with that threat. When we feel positive emotions, we don't need to focus on the bear. The bear doesn't even exist anymore. We can focus on the forest. So when we feel positive emotions, we start seeing the bigger picture, and we can relax and actually start connecting more pieces in our lives, and start seeing really, like, that there might be something more to this life than just what is right there.

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Dan LeDuc: Do you hear something about yourself in these conversations? We'd like to know. Reach out on Twitter ([@PewTrusts](https://twitter.com/PewTrusts)) or drop us an email at podcasts@pewtrusts.org. And let us know how you think we're doing here. Leave a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen.

Thanks for joining us. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."

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