



After the Fact | [What Religious Type Are You?](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host: Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, agnostic, atheist. Those are just some of the traditional labels defining religious practices, or the lack of them, in America. But a recent analysis from the Pew Research Center took a new look at the beliefs and behaviors that cut across those labels. And it turns out there are some important traits that divide people of the same religious affiliation—and *a lot* that unite people of different faiths.

["After the Fact" theme music]

For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact." Our data point for this episode is 39 percent.

Thirty-nine percent of Americans are highly religious, according to the Pew Research Center study that created a new typology of religion in America.

We sat down with one of the report's authors, Rich Morin, to learn more about this new way of looking at how people live and profess their religious beliefs.

Dan LeDuc: So, Rich Morin, welcome. You guys at the Pew Research Center always come up with new ways of looking at the world. And in the world of religion, we've all been used to reading polling surveys about Catholics and Protestants and the Jewish community. And we sort of get that, right. That's the way we think of religion in this country. You guys decided to do it differently. Tell us what differently is.

Rich Morin, senior editor, Pew Research Center: *[Chuckles]* We wanted to step away from the traditional way of defining Americans by denomination, as you mentioned—Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Mormons. And we wanted to create a typology that was based on beliefs, shared practices, shared depth of religious conviction, and also other sources of meaning and fulfillment in their lives.

We did this for two reasons. We first want to illuminate the elements, the factors that unite people across religious denominations. But then we also wanted to look at the beliefs and practices that divide people within religious denominations.



Dan LeDuc: So, on the face of it, it makes a lot of sense when you finally get to it, right. It's like, you can look at so many deeply religious groups, for example. White evangelicals are known for going to church a lot. Conservative Catholic groups are known for going to church a lot. We know that from other surveys. Looking at it from that perspective suddenly gives you like this whole new view of religious life that is so important in this country.

Rich Morin: I think one of the real contributions of the survey is that it underscores the diversity of religious experience. Yes, some groups go to church more often than others. But across every faith, there are people who are diligent in their practice and in the depth of their beliefs. We wanted to make sure that those people were reflected in a group that reflected those beliefs and also how they practice their faith.

Dan LeDuc: Well, let's break down the typology by name and sort of categories that you guys came up with.

Rich Morin: We came up with seven groups. The groups ranged from a very religious group to a group that was not religious or spiritual at all.

The most religious of our groups we called the "Sunday Stalwarts." These are religious traditionalists who are actively involved in their faith and deeply involved in their congregations.

The Sunday Stalwarts were also joiners and voters. They were twice as likely as any other group to participate in community associations or in youth organizations, like Little League or the PTA. And they are also far more likely to vote in local elections than any of the other groups.

Eight in 10 attend religious services at least once a week. That's three times the share that attend religious services in the next most religious group.

The second most religious group we called "God and Country Believers." They're socially and politically conservative. Two-thirds said immigrants harm American culture. No other group was so severe in their judgments of the impact of immigrants on American life.

The third most religious group we called the "Diversely Devout." These are traditionally religious people. At the same time, they were the only highly religious group where majorities also believed in psychics, believed in incarnation, astrology, and that physical objects like crystals, mountains, and trees can contain spiritual energy.



Dan LeDuc: And taken altogether, they represent better than a third of Americans, right?

Rich Morin: These three groups represent about 39 percent of all adults. And these are the groups that we defined as being highly religious.

Dan LeDuc: Mmm hmm. Who is next down the category?

Rich Morin: *[Chuckles]*

Dan LeDuc: Because you sort of have it in descending order of religiosity, is that the right way to talk about it?

Rich Morin: Exactly. That's the way for the purposes of organization we did it. There were two groups that we called the "somewhat religious." The first is the "Relaxed Religious." I like to consider them to be the "religious light." These are people who hold many religious beliefs, except they don't go to church. They don't pray. And they don't read Scriptures on a regular basis.

One defining characteristic of this group, however, is that they reject New Age beliefs. This differentiates them from the group we call the "Spiritually Awake." These Americans hold some religious beliefs. Most believe in heaven, most believe in hell, but few practice religion in traditional ways.

Large majorities subscribe to most New Age beliefs. About half believe in the God of the Bible, but at the same time the other half believe in a universal spirit or life force. They also believe it's not necessary to believe in God to be a moral person, a view rejected by most of the highly religious groups.

Now we move into the nonreligious groups.

Nonreligious groups comprise about 29 percent of the population. We call the first the "Religion Resisters." Nearly two-thirds of these people say that religion does more harm than good in society. It's the only group in which a majority holds this severe a view of the impact of organized religion.

A majority describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. Large majorities believe in psychics and that certain objects can contain a spiritual energy. They are liberal and predominantly Democratic.

The least religious group that we identified, we call the "Solidly Secular." These Americans hold virtually no religious beliefs. And they don't consider themselves to be



particularly spiritual. They uniformly reject New Age practices. But this is key—they don't have a hostile view of organized religion.

This group is far less critical of organized religion than the Religion Resisters. What do they believe? When it comes to God, half the people in this group say, nothing at all. They tilt Democratic and liberal. And they are the most affluent of the seven religious groups.

Dan LeDuc: Really? Really? So in looking at this list—and for people who are listening, we can put a chart online that'll sort of break down all these percentages. But what I found striking was your highly religious, somewhat religious, and nonreligious—three categories. And they're almost—not exactly—in thirds. Was that sort of intentional when you're trying to create the typology, or did it just happen?

Rich Morin: I can say none of this was intentional. We wanted to create a typology, but we allowed a computer algorithm to define the groups and the percentage of our sample that fell into each one. So this is purely by chance and based on the answers that respondents gave.

Dan LeDuc: That I find fascinating that we can sort of divide our religious views basically in thirds.

Rich Morin: *[Laughs]*

Dan LeDuc: You know, it's sort of the most devout, the sort of somewhat devout, and then the ones not so much. I'm curious how that would match just people's interaction in their daily lives sometimes.

Rich Morin: It would be interesting to know that, too. I might also add that if you wanted to, you could say there were two groups—religious folks and nonreligious folks. And if you did that, you'd find about two-thirds of the country at least has some religious affiliation or connection or beliefs, and a third does not.

Dan LeDuc: And that means that this nation is a pretty religious nation.

Rich Morin: Always has been.

Dan LeDuc: Always has been. I mean, in comparison to other surveys the Pew Research Center has done, say, in Western Europe, for example, the United States remains a very religious nation.



Rich Morin: That's what our other surveys have found. Now, religious participation, a depth of belief seems to be incrementally declining. But if you look at the numbers, I think you might be surprised that it isn't declining as much as maybe it's popularly portrayed.

Dan LeDuc: So talk about like the size of this survey, to be able to draw the sort of broad conclusions that you've done.

Rich Morin: Happily, it was huge. We had more than 4,700 adults. We used the Pew American Trends panel, which is a nationally representative sample of the population.

Dan LeDuc: And then those answers are then put into these algorithms that lead to the categories?

Rich Morin: That becomes the raw material. The computer does the actual sorting of respondents into the groups. We used a technique called cluster analysis, which is commonly used in the social sciences to create typologies. All a typology is, is a system for classifying things by some set of shared characteristics.

Dan LeDuc: What are the types of questions that you asked?

Rich Morin: We wanted to ask questions that measured, as precisely as we could, elements of each one of these areas. We had a real advantage because some of the key questions had been asked in previous Pew surveys.

Dan LeDuc: What's an example of some of these sort of questions?

Rich Morin: There were a number of key areas that we wanted to measure. The first was religious engagement. And we measured this by simply asking people how often they attended church services, how often they prayed, how often they participated in church groups.

But we wanted to move beyond that and broaden it a bit to measure the degree of their spirituality and religious identity. So we asked them whether they thought themselves to be religious or not and asked them did they consider themselves to be spiritual or not.

We tried to drill down on some specific characteristic beliefs of religious people. We asked if they believed in the God of the Bible. We asked if they believe that the Bible was the word of God to be taken literally, or was written by men or it was inspired by God. And we asked if they believed in heaven, asked them if they believed in hell.



Interestingly enough, a small but significant proportion of people believe in heaven but don't believe in hell.

We also asked them for belief in New Age practices and beliefs. The specific one we measured to include in the typology was whether or not you believe that spiritual energy could be contained in physical objects.

But then we expanded out to test other sources of meaning that people might have. We asked them how they derived meaning from their religious faith. We ask them how much meaning and fulfillment they derived from spiritual practices, such as meditation. We also asked them how much meaning and fulfillment they derived from just being outdoors in nature.

Finally, we wanted to measure their view of the impact of religion. We asked them whether churches and religious organizations do more harm than good or more good than harm in American society. And we also asked them if their religious beliefs help them in their family relationships.

Dan LeDuc: So all of this goes into sort of a computer algorithm and helps you generate groups of respondents.

Rich Morin: Exactly right. The researcher selects the number of groups to be created. The researcher also suggests the questions that are going to be used to sort people into groups. But then the computer algorithm takes over and does the sorting.

Dan LeDuc: And so these titles were something that the researchers at the Pew Research Center came up with?

Rich Morin: Yes. *[Chuckles]*

Dan LeDuc: They're great, because they really help you understand each group and what defines them. What are some of the names that maybe didn't make it, though? I'm just sort of curious—

Rich Morin: *[Laughs]*

Dan LeDuc: When researchers are trying to sit down and think about, well, what else could we call these guys?

Rich Morin: Oh, let me tell you, naming the groups is the fun part of this research.

Dan LeDuc: *[Laughs]* I bet.



Rich Morin: *[Laughing]* The other is mind-numbing drudgery.

Dan LeDuc: *[Laughs]*

Rich Morin: So once you move from actually creating the cluster groups to naming them, you're moving from science to poetry. We tried to make sure that the group names illustrated some of the key characteristics of each group. We left a lot on the cutting room floor.

The Sunday Stalwarts, we talked about perhaps naming them “Engaged Believers” or “Faithful Joiners.”

The Diversely Devout—we were discussing perhaps calling them “Religious Omnivores,” since they were traditionally religious but also embraced New Age beliefs. The Relaxed Religious was a group that was somewhat hard to name. I lobbied hard for the name the “Religious Light,” and clearly I lost to a better name.

Dan LeDuc: So as the researchers looking at all this, what sort of conclusions were you able to draw about Americans and their religious beliefs that maybe you weren't able to before?

Rich Morin: I think this religious typology based on what people believe and how they practice their faith offers really a new way to look at American religious life. It identifies specific beliefs that unite traditional religious denominations, but it also illuminates the differences within people who share the same religious tradition.

But beyond those characteristics, we found three striking things. First of all, the low level of participation, even among those who consider themselves to be deeply religious. We also found widespread adoption of New Age beliefs, even among those who are religious in traditional ways.

And finally, we've found the many and diverse ways that people find meaning in their lives—of course, from their religious faith, but for many it's from family and friends. For others, it's being outdoors in nature.

But there are others that came as a surprise—significant shares of virtually all of the groups derived at least some meaning and fulfillment from their pets, from reading, from participating in volunteer and charitable work. While their religious faith was the number one source of meaning for people who identified themselves as religious, those who were not particularly religious were all over the spectrum, drawing meaning from many different areas of life.



Dan LeDuc: I was struck by, there seems to be a need among many Americans to be part of something—looking for some connectedness in all of this.

Rich Morin: What we found is that at least 70 percent of everyone we talked to said that being part of a community was at least somewhat important to them. And 24 percent said it was very important. Clearly, Americans are looking for a sense of connection. And they are looking for a community.

Dan LeDuc: Rich, thanks so much for all of this. It's a fascinating new perspective.

Rich Morin: Thank you very much.

Dan LeDuc: Are you more of a Sunday Stalwart or a Solidly Secular? There's a quiz on our website where you can see where you rank. That's at [Pewtrusts.org/AfterTheFact](https://www.pewtrusts.org/AfterTheFact).

If you like what you hear on this program, leave us a review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

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

[Closing theme music]