

## The Forum

# American faith: A work in pro

Politics and a new view of morality have radically altered the religious landscape.

By Stephen Prothero

Numbers lie, but they also tell tales, untrustworthy and otherwise. So the key question stirring around the much discussed U.S. Religious Landscape Survey released in late February by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life is what tale does it tell about the religious state of the union.

For some, the story of this survey, based on interviews in multiple languages with more than 35,000 U.S. adults, is the strength of American religion.

Not too long ago, I wrote that American atheism was going the way of the freak show. As books by Christopher Hitchens and other "new atheists" climbed the best-seller lists, I caught a lot of flak for that prophecy. But atheists make up only 1.6% of respondents to this survey. And 82% of respondents report that religion is either somewhat or very important in their lives.

Others find in this new data a nation of religious shoppers: 44% of the Americans surveyed have traded in their original religious home for another. Apparently, the grass is also greener at the church, synagogue or mosque next door.

Still others, noting that only 51% of Americans describe themselves as Protestants, see Protestantism teetering on the verge of becoming a minority.

Catholicism is at least by some readers of the tea leaves in trouble, too, now that ex-Catholics constitute 10% of the population.

## Diminished safeguards

The tale I take away from this study is that shifts in the political and moral winds are transforming American religion. Many believe that the Founders separated church and state in order to save the federal government from the interference of overzealous ministers. Not so. The purpose of the First Amendment's establishment clause — which prohibits the federal government from passing laws that favor any one religion (atheism included) — was to safeguard religion against the encroachment of politics. And this new survey suggests that those safeguards are, well, going the way of the freak show.

The key subplot here is the rise of "nones," a category growing faster than any other religious group. Of all adults in the USA, 16% say they are religiously unaf-

filiated, while 7% were raised that way. Moreover, 25% of younger Americans (ages 18-29) report no religious affiliation at all.

It is important to emphasize that this march of the "nones" is by no means beating the drums for the old secularization thesis, which posited that as societies embraced modernization they would shun God. This is because many "nones" are quite religious. In fact, many Americans refuse to affiliate with any religious organization not because they do not believe in God but because they believe in God so fervently that they cannot imagine any human institution capturing the mysteries of the divine. In this study, only about a quarter of all "nones" call themselves atheists or agnostics. In other surveys, about half the unaffiliated typically affirm the Christian God.

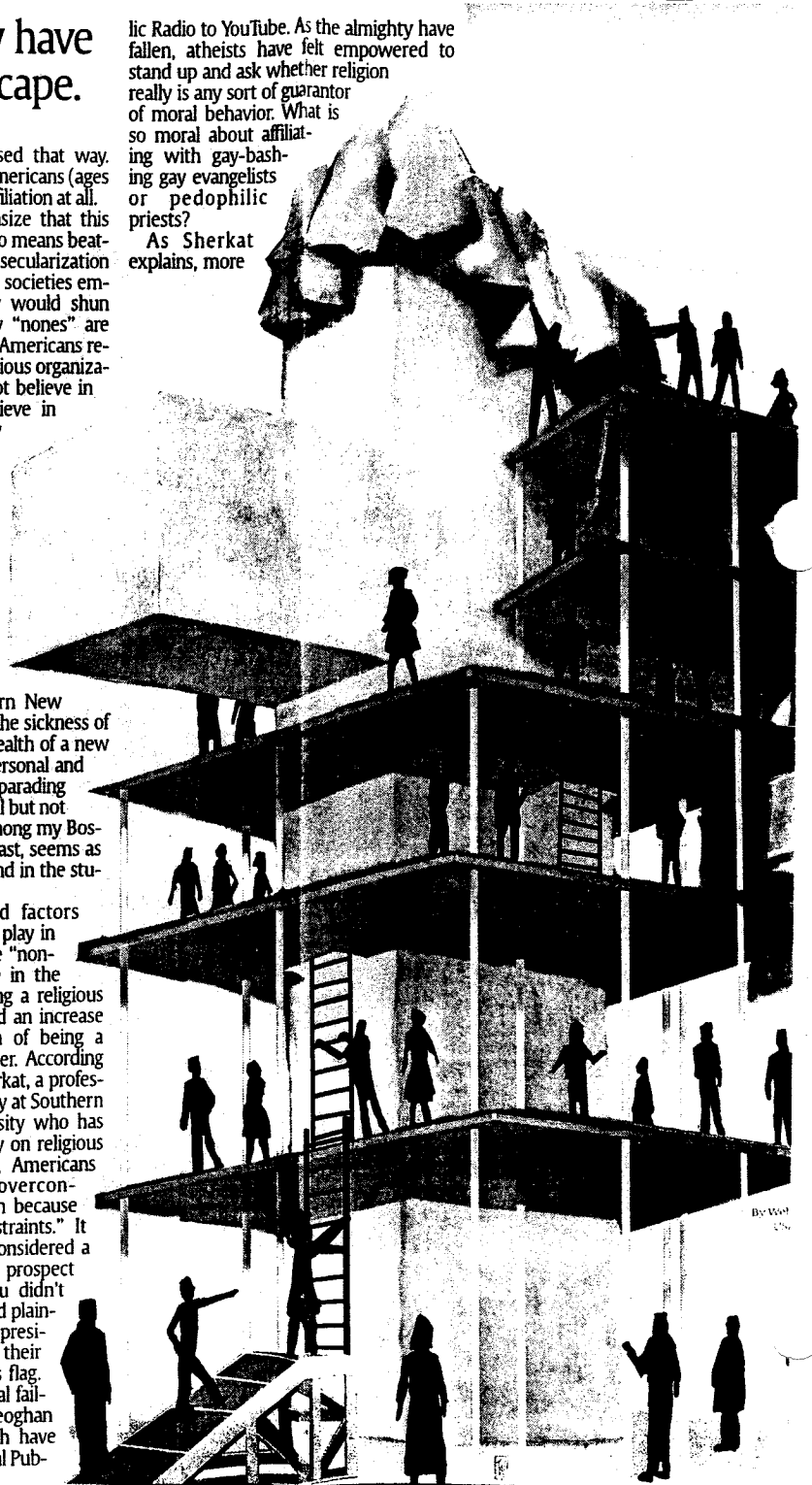
What does the rise of the "nones," particularly in Western states and northern New England, demonstrate? Not the sickness of religion in general but the health of a new kind of religion — a more personal and less institutional form often parading under the banner of "spiritual but not religious," an option that, among my Boston University students at least, seems as popular as the smoothie stand in the student union.

Two related factors seem to be at play in the rise of the "nones": a decline in the stigma of being a religious free agent, and an increase in the stigma of being a church member. According to Darren Sherkat, a professor of sociology at Southern Illinois University who has written widely on religious demographics, Americans have long "overconsumed religion because of social constraints." It

used to be that you were considered a bad citizen, a bad marriage prospect and a bad employee if you didn't show a little faith in faith. And plainly it is still imperative for presidential candidates to pledge their allegiance to God as well as flag. But in recent years, the moral failings of Ted Haggard, John Geoghan and other men of the cloth have been broadcast from National Pub-

lic Radio to YouTube. As the almighty have fallen, atheists have felt empowered to stand up and ask whether religion really is any sort of guarantor of moral behavior. What is so moral about affiliating with gay-bashing gay evangelists or pedophilic priests?

As Sherkat explains, more



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By Wolf

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# A work in progress

parents are deciding to raise their kids without any religion. And more of those children are staying unaffiliated as adults. All this is happening because the status gap between "nones" and believers has never been narrower.

Plainly, the Republican Party gained ground over the past quarter-century by attaching itself to family, morality and God, even as the Democratic Party lost ground by

focusing on such matters as rights and reason. In the process, the Republicans became the party of God and the Democrats the party of secularism — not a good strategy for the Democratic Party in a country where 96% of voters believe in God. So Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are both taking pains to pitch their party as a party of prayer and piety.

Even so, for much of the past generation, "Christian" and "conservative" have seemed to be interchangeable terms. It should not be surprising if at least some on the left who once upon a time might have described themselves as "Christians" have decided to jettison that affiliation for political reasons. Such reasons, it should be emphasized, are basically the same ones so many Europeans have divorced themselves from their country's established churches: because the marriage of a given church with a particular political regime is never eternal, and when it ends it leaves a lot of angry children in its wake.

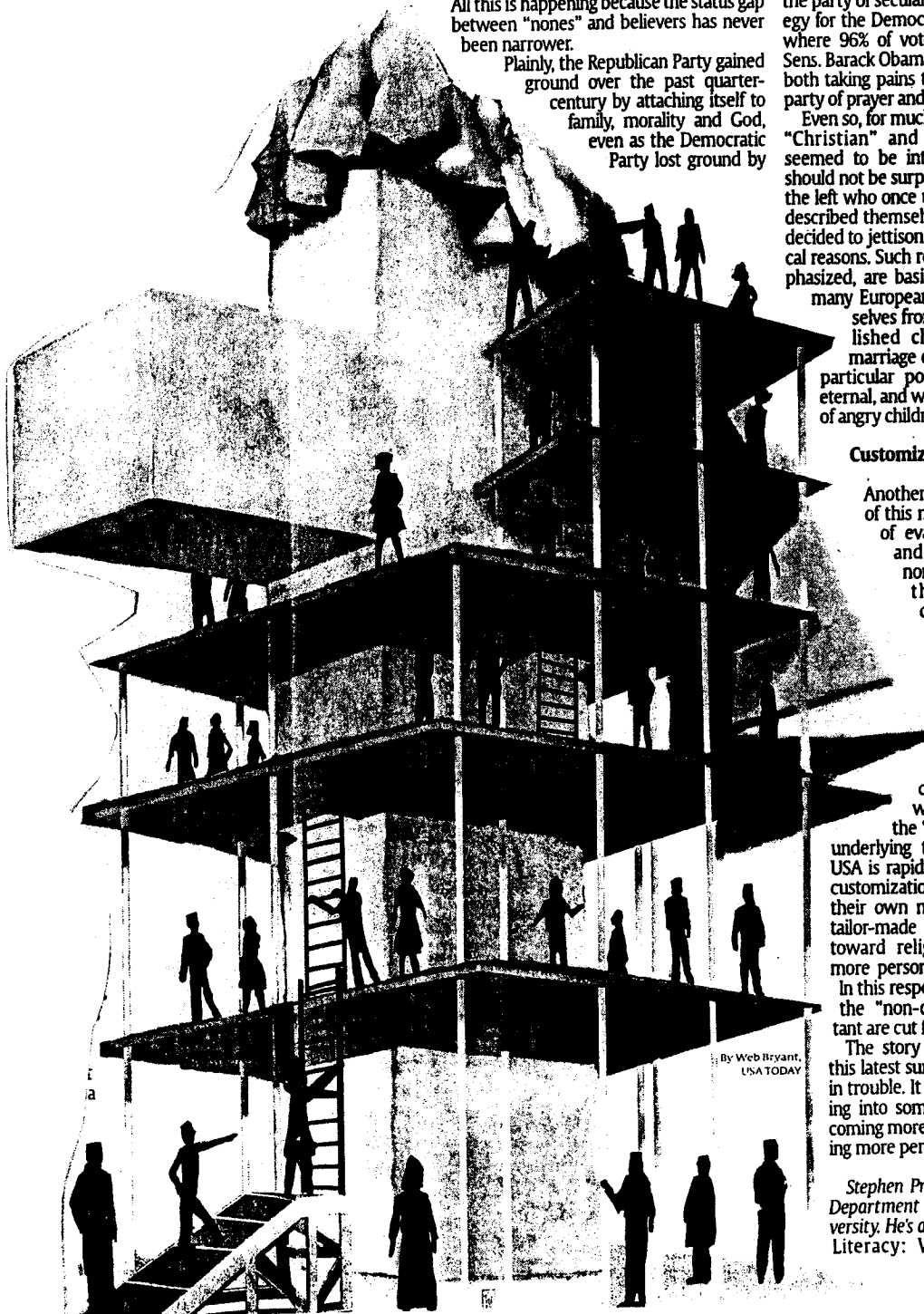
### Customized religion

Another story buried in the data of this new survey is the power of evangelical Protestantism, and particularly non-denominational churches. Of those surveyed, 44% called themselves "born again" or "evangelical" Christians, and among religious options non-denominational Protestantism is one of the fastest growing.

This story of the revenge of the evangelicals might seem at odds with the tale of the rise of the "nones," but the impulse underlying them is the same. The USA is rapidly becoming a culture of customization. People want to write their own marriage vows and have tailor-made funerals. They gravitate toward religious options that are more personal and less institutional. In this respect, the "unaffiliated" and the "non-denominational" Protestant are cut from the same cloth.

The story behind the numbers of this latest survey is not that religion is in trouble. It is that religion is morphing into something new. Faith is becoming more political. But it is becoming more personal at the same time.

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By Web Bryant,  
USA TODAY