

# Demographic Changes Impact Religious Institutions

Demography, “the science of vital and social statistics,” can help trend-spotters discern and explain many trends in American religion.

A rule of concerned participants in religious groups where trends are more often “downward-” than “upward-” pointing is: knowledge of demographic trends can help explain, but it cannot excuse, those who are coping or trying to cope with trends that mark “downwardness.”

Stunning news on the demographic front grabbed headlines and blog-attention with stories like this stunner in the [Wall Street Journal](#), “More White Americans Dying Than Being Born,” or [The New York Times](#), “Census Benchmark for White Americans: More Deaths Than Births.”

A majority of births in the U.S. now are to “Hispanic, black and Asian mothers.”

According to the U.S. Census figures released recently, the majority (50.1 percent) of children under age 5 are still white, but that huge majority figure – one-tenth of one percent(!) – will disappear in a year or so. These trends surprised demographers since they were not anticipated until 2020.

Neil Shah, in the *Wall Street Journal*, [says](#) that his paper’s headline refers to something that has occurred “for the first time in modern history.” That suggests noteworthiness.

Sam Roberts, in the *New York Times*, [observes](#) that the slight edge of non-Hispanic whites is simply the result of immigration and cannot help the old majority hang on any longer.

We pay attention to this because ethnic shifts are portentous for religious institutions, communities, loyalties and identities.

In 1975, Yale’s Harry S. Stout, in a major article called “Ethnicity: The Vital Center of Religion in America,” and in 1972, University of Chicago’s Martin E. Marty in a “presidential address” spoke and wrote of “Ethnicity: The Skeleton of Religion in America.”

These statements, and others dating from the 1970s, proposed that ethnic trends would have very, very much to do with the American religious future. And this has, indeed, turned out to be the case.

Racists, tribalists and the nostalgic can counteract, sound alarms, screech or merely panic, but they are not going to alter the demographic momentum.

Look at denominational records: ethnic trends in “Non-Hispanic” Catholicism match those among “Mainline Protestants” and are observable in some sectors in evangelicalism.

Say “Irish” or “Polish” and you think “Catholic.” Say “Scottish” and you can count Presbyterian heads or “Scandinavian” and expect that at least nominal Lutherans would make their appearance known.

Or so it had been. Much of the sometimes-lamented, religious boom from the end of World War II into the 1960s was related to the suburbanization of whites who had large families.

Today, census data reveals fewer lasting marriages, fewer marriages, more interfaith (and, often, religiously “diluting”) families, women adding work outside of the home to their work in the home, the mobility and the rootlessness that goes with this – all of these factors at odds with the traditional, habitual, reflexive identification of a people with a religious membership or involvement.

The heirs of the dwindling white majority can complain or explain, or they can accept the changes and help reconceive religious commitment.

The trends suggest opportunities for Hispanic Catholicism, Black Protestantism and Asian faith with whatever affiliation. As for non-Hispanic whites, the trends are a wakeup call, occasions to discern opportunities, and to pursue the paths of God, as they see these, in an ever-changing America.

The response begins with showing awareness, but that’s not all. We’ll continue to document changes.

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