

# Measuring Religious Intensity of Catholics, Evangelicals

Sciences live by measurement, be it of size, temperature, numbers or pace. So do social scientists in the world of religion.

David Gibson in Religion News Service and the Washington Post's "On Faith" blog [featured](#) the concept of "intensity" in a much-noted recent item: "Catholic Intensity Fades as Evangelical Devotion Surges."

How is intensity measured? Is an ecstatic Pentecostal "intense" and a Quaker or contemplative mystic less so? Are fundraisers and public relations leaders intense and believers dying in hospices less so?

Gibson did not have to answer such questions; he properly reduced "intensity" to degrees of participation in religious institutional life. What he saw was revealing.

Background: social scientists' subtleties get reduced to short-hand and headlines when they identify the groups that make up such institutional life.

Thus, "Catholic intensity" has to cover everyone from Dorothy Day or Thomas Merton and their acolytes to political interest groups that claim to speak for authentic Catholicism.

Group two, "Mainline Protestant" was invented several decades ago to cover what was then thought of as an "establishment" brand.

It includes congregations of Disciples of Christ in little churches on Oklahoma hilltops as well as High Church Anglicans, who may not even want to be thought of as Protestant.

The third of the Big Three settles for the category "Evangelical," and includes politically connected Fundamentalists at one pole and an array of church-related colleges on the other.

And then there is "Everyone Else."

On the political front, lazy newcomers to the observation of religion often identify "The Evangelical Vote" with the "Christian vote," a practice which irritates many

others who are Christian.

So be it; they shrug shoulders, and settle for misidentifications.

Now, to David Gibson on “intensity.” He features University of Nebraska sociologist Philip Schwadel, who measured the temperature and pace of Evangelicals in the 1970s and found back then only a five-point difference between how strongly Catholics and Evangelicals felt about their religion.

By 2010, he found that the “intensity gap” had grown to around 20 points.

Here was the shocker in his finding: today 56 percent of Evangelicals describe themselves as “strongly affiliated” with their religion compared with 35 percent of Catholics and, get this: “Even mainline Protestants reported a higher level of religious intensity than Catholics at 39 percent.”

African-American church members tend to have a measurable intensity comparable to that of Catholics.

Schwadel will report more fully in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Sociology of Religion*. Sociologists have been writing about declines in mainline Protestantism for a few decades, but the more drastic measurable decline in Catholics’ strength was “somewhat surprising.”

Another surprise: decline in Catholics’ intensity “did not necessarily correlate to a decline in Mass attendance by younger Catholics.”

My take-away, call it “the Marty Thesis,” if you will [I will!] is: “Mainline Protestantism” and “Catholicism” in America rise together, hold steady together, and, though one would not know it from the writings of some kinds of Evangelicals and secularists, decline together.

The reasons for the decline, topics for other days, may vary, from group to group, but few in church life have it easy today. Not a few Evangelicals would agree, noting that “decline” is contagious.

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