

Religion in the USA

As opposed to all industrialized countries in which church affiliation and attendance are steadily declining, **the US remains a very religious nation**. It is a widely accepted fact that the USA is one of the most developed nations in the world.

9 Americans out of ten say they believe in god, 40% go to church on a regular basis (in England that's 10 %), 60% say religion plays an significant role in their lives (against 21% in Europe). 80% of American adults consider themselves as Christians, with one third claiming to be “**born-again**”.

The Bible is an all time best-seller, with about 9 million copies a year.

60% of American report that they are active in their community church. The percentage is slightly higher in the South (74%) and the Midwest (76%) (**the Bible belt**).

How can the omnipresence of religion be accounted for in the USA why are its institutions secular and how has the intertwining of these two antithetical trends impacted upon current American society?

1- The omnipresence of religion : Secular but deeply religious

a) the Founding Fathers

The Founding Fathers intended the USA to be **a secular nation**. The 1st Amendment states that « Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibit the free exercise thereof. » thus establishing a clear separation between Church and state. **Religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution**. The idea was hammered in by Thomas Jefferson, who invoked a “wall of separation” to depict what he considered as an ideal relationship between Church and State.

b) The Pilgrim Fathers

On the other hand, there is another founding tale which is the story of the Pilgrim Fathers, the pioneers of British colonization in North America. The Pilgrim Fathers were a group of 102 people, led by English Puritans, who settled in America to flee religious persecution and founded a colony in Plymouth in 1620. They wanted to establish **a model Christian Commonwealth in America**, and set an example for Europeans to follow.

c) Leading religions

A- Protestantism

55% Americans are protestant. The Baptists gather 32.5 million members. There are also more radical groups such as Mennonites or Amish.

Blacks and whites often attend separate churches.

Among the protestants, Episcopalians are regarded as the elite denomination while Baptists or Methodists traditionally belong to the less wealthy. The Roman Catholic church used to be associated with the working-class (Irish members).

American churches, apart from the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian, have a very decentralized structure, with authority vested in the congregation.

Protestants have no church hierarchy. Church members organize an assembly and choose their own minister. In case of disagreement they split up.

The State of Pennsylvania was created by Quakers, Maryland by Catholics, Rhode Island and Connecticut by Puritan dissenters, Utah is home of the Mormon community since the 19th century.

Protestantism has over 200 denominations, all in all around 1,500 distinct religious affiliations are cited.

B- Roman Catholic

28% are Roman Catholic (mainly in Texas, New Mexico, Florida, California)

At the beginning of the 20th century, Catholic immigrants from the South of Europe settled in the USA. In the popular imagery, Catholics are immoral, badly brought-up, paying allegiance to the pope at the expense of the US. They lost part of their negative image with the election of John F. Kennedy (who was a Catholic) in 1960s. Catholicism is on the rise today due to the increase of the hispanic population. American Catholics are less respectful of the pope's guidelines than in Europe.

C- Judaism

The first jews were Sephardic jews, from Spain and Portugal, not numerous and well-integrated among their WASP counterparts.

In the early 20th Ashkenazi jews who fled the pogroms and persecutions in Central Europe came to the USA. There are 3 groups in the jewish community : Orthodox Jews (fundamentalists), Reform Jews, and Conservative Jews who try to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. There are 6M jews today, that's **2% of the population**, mainly in large cities in the North East, the West, the Great Lakes and Florida. New York is the city where the Jewish population is the largest.

Between 40 and 50% marry non-Jews. American Jews represent the most important Diaspora community and **play an important part in American society** through their organizations such as *Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith*. The survival of Israel is one of the major preoccupation of American Jews, raising 300 million dollars annually for that cause.

D-Islam

There are between **4 and 6 M Muslims** in the US today (vs. 4M oriental religions like Hinduism and Buddhism). **Islam is the fastest growing religion**. Nearly all of the 1,200 mosques were founded in the last 30 years. Muslims are to be found mainly in New York, California and the Midwest (Illinois). A majority are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from Islamic countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and 24% are African-Americans converted from Christianity. One fifth of those brought to America as slaves had been Muslims in their home countries. Converting to islam represents a quest for lost roots.

Black muslims create associations like the American Muslim Mission for example

They have a **poor image** in the US, further reinforced by WRC bombing of Feb 1993. 9/11 confirmed the suspicions. Hate crimes against Muslims and South East Asians such as the Sikhs who are often associated with terrorism, fanaticism and anti-Semitism are frequent.

E- Sects

- The Mormons (outgrowth of Protestantism, founded in 1830, Salt Lake City, Utah). There are 4.8 millions of Mormons. They believe that by registering the existence of all human beings that have lived on the planet they can ensure the salvation of the entire human race. They have a strict way of life : they don't smoke, don't drink, don't do drugs, and believe there should be no sex outside marriage, 10% of their income goes to the church, and part of their lives is devoted to community or humanitarian work.
- The Quakers : They preach tolerance, simplicity, equality and pacifism. They were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1947. There are 120,000 members today.
- other sects : There are between 700 and 2,000 other sects in the USA.

2 – The influence of religion on American society : the puritan 's legacy

- **moral values and ethics**

Americans have a **sense of being an elected people, chosen by God**. *Revivalism* has a strong impact in the USA : Americans **are used to expressing their religious zeal** and the deeply-felt relationship with the Saviour openly, unlike Western Europeans, who tend to keep their religious beliefs to themselves.

They sometimes follow high moral codes of conduct bordering on the austere, with a strong work ethic, a belief in Calvinist predestination and salvation. The adjective “puritan” now refers to negative traits such as rigidity and moral conservatism.

The different waves of immigrants mean that they have transplanted their religious institutions, which have not only served as places of worship, but also as means to foster ties with people from the home country through recreational activities like cooking or bowling contests.

- **Class system and welfare system**

The American class system is also one of the obvious factors underpinning the importance of religion in the USA. According to some sociologists, the more economically vulnerable a country's citizens feel, the more religious they tend to be. The weak safety net due to poor welfare system coupled with rugged capitalism (*capitalisme sauvage*) explains partly the phenomenon. It is also clear that **the poor welfare system in modern-day America stems from the Calvinist doctrine of predestination**, according to which wealth is a sign of God's blessing, while repeated failure shows that one deserves neither salvation nor help.

- **Religion and Business**

- a) **the electronic church or televangelism¹ : a 2 billion-dollar-a-year business**

Televangelism began as a uniquely American phenomenon, resulting from a largely deregulated media where access to television networks and cable TV is open to virtually anyone who can afford it, combined with a large Christian population that is able to provide the necessary funding. It became especially popular among Evangelical Protestant audiences, whether independent or organized around Christian denominations. However, the increasing globalisation of broadcasting has enabled some American televangelists to reach a wider audience through international broadcast networks, including some that are specifically Christian in nature, such as Trinity Broadcasting Network and The God Channel. Domestically produced televangelism is increasingly present in some other nations such as Brazil. (source Wikipedia)

- b) **Megachurches² and other theme parks**

Mega churches across the United States are becoming increasingly popular which is not only bringing thousands of worshippers together, but also billions of dollars in profit.

1

Televangelism (tele- "distance" and "evangelism," meaning "ministry," sometimes called **teleministry**) is the use of media, specifically radio and television, to communicate Christianity. Televangelists are ministers, whether official or self-proclaimed, who devote a large portion of their ministry to television broadcasting. Some televangelists are also regular pastors or ministers in their own places of worship (often a megachurch), but the majority of their followers come from TV and radio audiences. Others do not have a conventional congregation, and work primarily through television. The term is also used derisively by critics as an insinuation of aggrandizement by such ministers.

2 A **megachurch** is a church with an unusually large membership, who also offer a variety of educational and social activities, usually Protestant or Evangelical. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research defines a megachurch as any Protestant Christian church having 2,000 or more people in average weekend attendance. The concept originated in the mid 19th century, continued into the mid 20th century as a phenomenon, and expanded rapidly through the 1980s and 1990s; it is widely seen across the US in the early 21st century.

From self-help books to CDs and DVDs, mega churches are becoming big money makers for the pastors and ministries they are a part of. Mega churches are extra-large churches that can accommodate upwards of 15,000 people and are common among members of the evangelical Christian faith.

Scott Thumma, professor of sociology and religion at Hartford Seminary told CNN that "the mega church on average has about \$6.5 million in income a year." "If you put together all the mega churches in the United States, that's easily several billion dollars."

Many ministers in the evangelical faith have become superstars in their own right -- Joel Osteen is one in particular. Osteen is a pastor at the Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas and his televised service reaches over seven million people each week across the United States and around the world. The way the sermon is told at these mega churches has also completely changed.

"The plasma screen TVs have replaced crosses, Power Point-like presentations of the words of songs and liturgical practices have replaced the hymnals," Walton said. "This really resonates with a younger generation." The average age of a mega church worshipper is 40 years old -- 13 years younger than at a traditional church. Mega church worshippers tend to not only be younger, but also more diverse. (source : CNN)

There are even religious theme parks in the USA : *The Holy Land Experience* in Florida, or *Christus Gardens* in Tennessee.

3 – Religion and politics : « One Nation under God » (motto)

- **Omnipresence of religion in politics**

American society is pervaded by religion and Americans constantly refer to God. « In God We Trust » is engraved on the American currency since the American Civil War and has been the national motto since 1956. Each American President swears his Oath of Office on the Bible. Prayers open each Congressional sessions and references to God and the Bible pepper most politicians' speeches. Until 1962 prayers were compulsory in American Public Schools. Now they are outlawed but the pledge of Allegiance which contain the expression "one nation under God" is often recited. Many black political leaders were or still are preachers (Malcolm X, MLK, Jesse Jackson, James Baldwin). The church is always linked to social and political activism.

- **Religion as a rhetorical tool**

Former US President G.W.Bush is a born-again Methodist and speaks of Jesus Christ as his favourite philosopher. He once famously said that he believed God wanted him to be President. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he coined the phrase "the Axis of Evil" in his State of the Union Address delivered on January 29, 2002. The use of the term "evil" is revealing. It was not the first time an American politician used a religious term. Ronald Reagan described the Soviet bloc as "The Empire of Evil" during the Cold War. He would pepper his speeches with Bible verses and vowed to uphold the nation's Judeo-Christian values so that the religious right, led by Jerry Falwell, a famous televangelist, largely contributed to his landslide victories during the Presidential elections.

There are various reasons why religion is embroiled in American public life, but **the influence of conservative Christians** united under the banner of the Moral Majority has been of paramount evidence in influencing policy-makers since the 1970s and in injecting religion into political debates. Conservative Christians have always stood for school prayer, creationism, and anti-liberal, anti-gay and pro-life views, but also for Big Business, hence their support for small government, and low taxes. This broad agenda is channelled by right wing media such as Fox News or by radio talk journalists, Rush Limbaugh being a case in point. The Republican Party benefits from their support more often than not, which has pushed Democrats to emphasize their own religious beliefs (cf. Barack Obama during his first presidential campaign(with a resemblance to Martin Luther

King's political discourse), which garnered the support of the Black Christian Church, cradle of the Civil Rights Movement).

- **Conservatism and creationism**

In the course of the 20th century, conservative Christians made a push to reinstate **core American values** : they struggled against dancing or gambling or other pleasurable activities, and supported Prohibition. Moral codes were also imposed on the Hollywood movie industry so that 'indecent scenes' representing or evoking scenes of nudity, childbirth or illegal trafficking were outlawed.

Between 1923 and 1925, **the advocates of creationism**, who were opposed to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, running counter to their literal reading of the book of Genesis, managed to have four Southern States (Oklahoma, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas) stop teaching Darwinism in public schools.

The battle between liberal forces and Christian conservatives shows no sign of abating in contemporary America. Several years ago **the state of Kansas banned evolution from its exams**, thus virtually putting an end to its teaching. Several other states barred the word from their textbooks. More recently, many states have considered laws entitling teachers to question scientific theories including Darwinism, and **such laws have been implemented in Louisiana and Tennessee**.

Conclusion :

The American brand of secularism is a very porous notion and there is **no clear-cut distinction between religion and the political sphere**. President Donald Trump is no exception to the tendency, with frequent references to God and his vow to cancel the 1954 Johnson amendment, which forbids religious institutions from engaging in political activities.