

Freshman hordes more godless than ever

Allen B. Downey

Draft: Do not distribute.

According to a survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, students entering college are staying away from religion in record numbers; 19% have no religious preference, and more than 23% have not attended a religious service in the last year—a new high in the 39-year history of the survey [1][2].

In 2006 more than 271,000 students at 393 colleges participated in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), a longitudinal study of college freshmen. The CIRP survey includes questions about students' backgrounds, activities and attitudes.

In one question students are asked their “current religious preference” and given a choice of 17 common religions and Christian denominations, “Other Christian,” “Other religion,” or “None”.

Another question asks students how often they “attended a religious service” in the last year. The choices are “Frequently,” “Occasionally,” and “Not at all.” The instructions ask students to select “Occasionally” if they attended one or more times, so a nonobservant student who attended a wedding and a funeral (and follows instructions) would not be counted among the apostates.

Figure 1 tracks students' responses from 1968 to 2006.

The ecstasy of apostasy

The number of students with no religious preference has been increasing steadily since the low point of 8.3% in 1978. The apostasy rate is also increasing, although a sharp increase in the late 80s was reversed for a time in the early 90s. Both numbers have been climbing steadily since 1997.

The rate of growth from 1980 to the present has been between 0.25 and 0.35 percentage points per year, which is consistent with other observations from the 60s and 70s [3]. Since 1997, the rate may have increased to 0.6 or 0.7 percentage points per year. At that rate the Class of 2056 will be majority atheist.

Both curves show a possible acceleration between 2005 and 2006. This jump may be due to increased visibility of atheism following the publication of books by Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins.

The gap between the curves represents the number of students who profess a religious preference but admittedly never exercise it. This “hypocrisy gap” closed substantially in the 90s, but increased in the last few years. The size of the gap may reflect the level of social pressure on nonbelievers to declare association with a religion.

The survey results show a persistent gender gap: 21.2% of men reported no religious preference, but only 17.4% of women did. Similarly, while 25.7% of men reported no participation in religious services, only 21.2% of women did. These gaps have been consistent over the history of the survey, but it is hard to say whether the apparent difference in religiosity is real. Women may be as likely as men to disbelieve, but professing atheism involves a tradeoff between the satisfaction of philosophic consistency and the discomfort of social stigma. Men and women might assess these costs and benefits differently.

Not surprisingly, students at religious colleges are more religious, but not as much as you might expect. For example, 9% of students at Catholic colleges have no religious preference, and more than 15% haven't been to church in the last year. Students at historically black

colleges are actually more religious. Only 6% report no religious preference and only 8% haven't attended a religious service.

In loco parentis

The survey also asked about parents' religion. Almost 15% of the students' fathers have no religious preference (at least according to their children), compared to 10% of mothers.

The generational lag tells an interesting story. Fathers now are at the level of male students in 1998; mothers are at the level of female students in 1997.

In 1988, when these students were born, the average maternal age in the U.S. was a little over 25 [4]. So we would expect the generation lag to be 25 years for mothers, and a few years more for fathers.

But the actual lags are only 18-19 years, which suggests either that some parents came to atheism after entering college or that their children underestimate their devoutness. Both may be true, but the hypocrisy gap supports the second explanation, assuming that children base their response on what parents do rather than what they say.

The general population

College students are obviously a biased sample of the population; among other things, they are more likely to be college-educated. People with more education are less likely to believe in heaven, the devil, miracles and the literal truth of the Christian bible [5]. However, contrary to many people's expectation, educated people are *more* likely to attend services. So, we expect the students in this sample to be less believing than the general population, but also more observant.

There is reason to think that the rate of secularization in the general population is faster than what we see in this sample. Over the lifetime of the CIRP survey, college education has democratized; the percentage of high school graduates who enter college immediately

after graduation has increased from roughly 50% in 1970 to 65% in 2003 [6]. Over this time CIRP has included more poor students, more racial minorities, and more students from families with less education. These groups tend to be more religious than the general population, so we expect their participation to increase the level of religiosity in the sample. Thus, the observed decrease probably underestimates the trend in the general population.

Secularization

The theory of secularization—that there is a global long-term trend away from religion—is controversial. Early sociologists, notably Max Weber, hypothesized that secularization is a predictable effect of rationalization—the increasing tendency for social actions to be based on reason rather than emotion or tradition.

In the 1950s and 60s, many sociologists of religion defended strong theories of secularization, but since then several of them, including Peter Berger and Harvey Cox, have reversed their position, arguing that religion is resurging in some areas, including the United States [7].

The data presented here speak directly to this debate. The CIRP survey has posed almost exactly the same questions to a large sample of a consistently-defined group for almost 40 years, and the results show a clear and consistent trend away from both identification with religious sects and participation in religious services. These data make a strong case for secularization in the United States that has, if anything, accelerated in the last decade.

Sources

[1] Pryor, J.H., Hurtado, S., Saenz, V.B., Korn, J.S., Santos, J.L, Korn, W.S., *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2006*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA (2006).

[2] Astin A.W., Oseguera L., Sax, L.J., Korn, W.S., *The American Freshman: Thirty-*

Five Year Trends. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA (2002).

[3] Smith, T.W., “Counting Flocks and Lost Sheep: Trends in Religious Preference Since World War II”, GSS Social Change Report No. 26, available from <http://webapp.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/>, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago (1988).

[4] *National Survey of Family Growth*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Hyattsville, MD (1997).

[5] Sacerdote, B. and Glaeser, E.L., ”Education and Religion,” Harvard Institute of Economic Research Working Paper 1913, available from <http://post.economics.harvard.edu/hier/2001papers/2001list.html>, (2001).

[6] Hawkins, D.A. and Clinedinst, M., “State of College Admission 2006”, National Association for College Admission Counseling (2006).

[7] Berger et al., “The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics,” Eerdmans Publishing Company (1999).

About the author

Allen Downey is an Associate Professor of Computer Science at the Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering in Needham, MA and the author of “How to Think Like a Computer Scientist.”

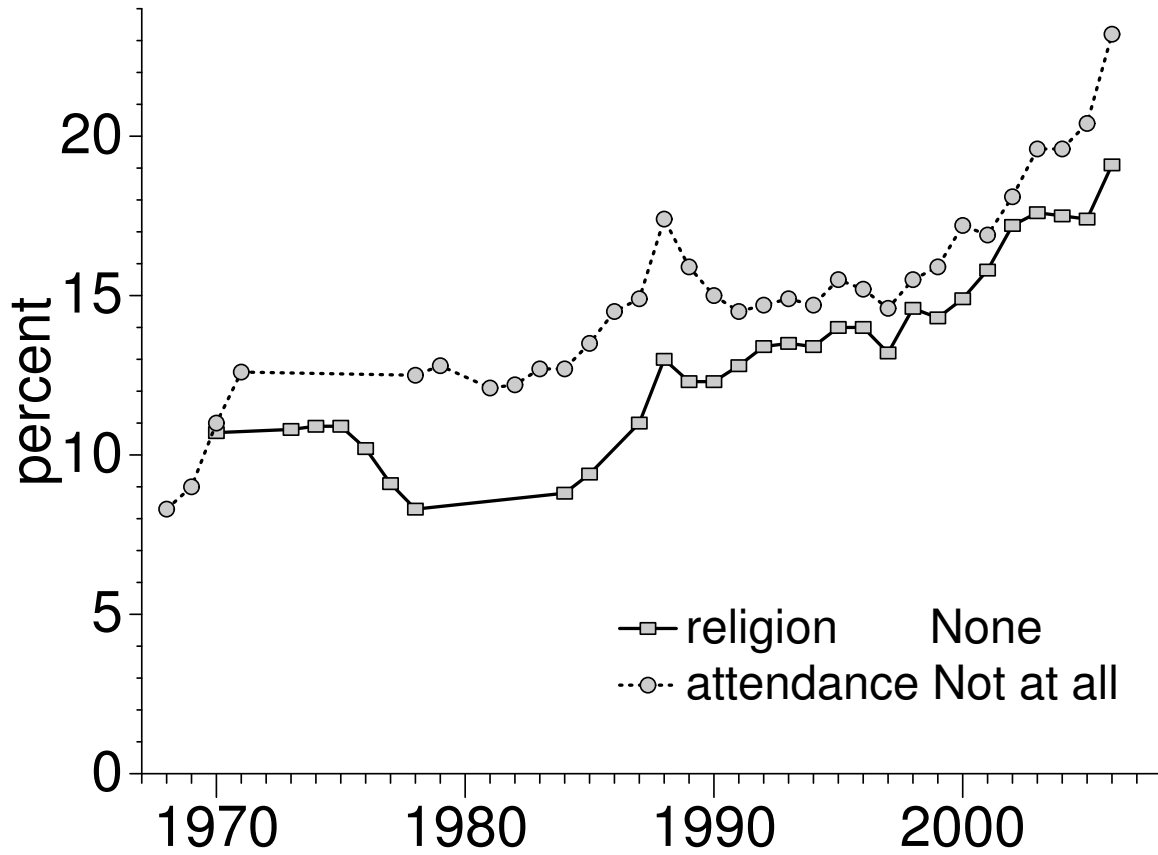


Figure 1: Percentage of entering freshmen reporting no religious preference and no attendance at a religious service in the last year.