

*Americans Haven't Found a Satisfying Alternative to Religion*  
Lauren Jackson, NY Times 4.18.25

I never really wanted to leave my faith. I wasn't interested in exile — familial, cultural or spiritual. But my curiosity pulled me away from an Arkansas chapel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and toward a secular university. There, I tried to be both religious and cool, believing but discerning. I didn't see any incompatibility between those things. But America's intense ideological polarity made me feel as if I had to pick.

I spent my 20s worshiping at the altar of work and, in my free time, testing secular ideas for how to live well. I built a community. I volunteered. I cared for my nieces and nephews. I pursued wellness. I paid for workout classes on Sunday mornings, practiced mindfulness, went to therapy, visited saunas and subscribed to meditation apps. I tried book clubs and running clubs. Nothing has felt quite like that chapel in Arkansas.

America's secularization was an immense social transformation. Has it left us better off? People are unhappier than they've ever been and the country is in an epidemic of loneliness. It's not just secularism that's to blame, but those without religious affiliation in particular rank lower on key metrics of well-being. They feel less connected to others, less spiritually at peace and they experience less awe and gratitude regularly.

Now, the country seems to be revisiting the role of religion. Secularization is on pause in America, a study from Pew found this year. This is a major, generational shift. People are no longer leaving Christianity; other major religions are growing. Almost all Americans — 92 percent of adults, both inside and outside of religion — say they hold some form of spiritual belief, in a god, human souls or spirits, an afterlife or something “beyond the natural world.” But for now, secularism has not yet triumphed over religion. Instead, its limits in America may be exposed.

I have spent the last year reporting on belief, interviewing hundreds of people. I've visited dozens of houses of worship, spiritual retreats and wellness centers. I also heard from more than 4,000 Times readers who responded to a survey. Many of the demographers, psychologists, sociologists and statisticians I spoke to offered the same explanation: Americans simply haven't found a satisfying alternative to religion.

Religion provides what sociologists call the “three B's”: belief, belonging and behaviors. It offers beliefs that supply answers to the tough questions of life. It gives people a place they feel they belong, a community where they are known. And it tells them how to behave, or at least what tenets should guide their action. Religious institutions have spent millennia getting really good at offering these benefits to people.

For the last few decades, much of the world has tried to go without God, a departure from most of recorded history. More than a billion people globally and about a third of Americans have tried to live without religion. Studies in recent years have offered insights into how that is going. The data doesn't look good. “There is overwhelming empirical support for the value of being at a house of worship on a regular basis on all kinds of metrics — mental health, physical health, having more friends, being less lonely,” said Ryan Burge, a former pastor and a leading researcher on religious trends.

Pew's findings corroborate that idea: Actively religious people tend to report they are happier than people who don't practice religion. Religious Americans are healthier, too. They are significantly less likely to be depressed or to die by suicide, alcoholism, cancer, cardiovascular illness or other causes. In a long-term study, doctors at Harvard found that women who attended religious services once a week were 33 percent less likely to die prematurely than women who never attended. That's because, said Tyler J. VanderWeele, an author on the Harvard study, "they had higher levels of social support, better health behaviors and greater optimism about the future."

Religiously affiliated Americans are more likely to feel gratitude (by 23 percentage points), spiritual peace (by 27 points) and "a deep sense of connection with humanity" (by 15 points) regularly than people without a religious affiliation, researchers found this year. The latter is particularly important: Positive relationships are the single most important predictor of well-being, according to the longest-running study on human happiness in the world.

The pandemic, with its doomscrolling and isolation, seemed to awaken many Americans to their dissatisfaction. That is what I heard, again and again, in my reporting: Dana Bocus, a 38-year-old living in Ashton, Md., was raised Catholic but stopped attending church in adulthood. "Then the pandemic happened and I had two children and the weight of the world felt too heavy to carry alone," she said. "I was starved for community, so I gave an international Christian church a try."

Church attendance rates have been slipping for decades. But since the pandemic began, the number of people attending religious services — either in person or virtually — has remained consistent at about 40 percent. About a quarter of Americans told Pew that the pandemic had strengthened their existing faith. "Covid may have cemented or reinforced the importance of religion to people who were already religious," said Alan Cooperman, an author of the Pew report.

There is plenty of evidence, though, that people aren't just religious because of insecurity or instability. Highly educated people are more likely than people who attended only high school to go to religious services weekly. Additionally, Hindus, Jews, Mainline Protestants and Muslims are all more likely than religiously unaffiliated people to have at least a college degree. These are people who tend to have good jobs, higher incomes and private health care. They are going to religious services because they are getting something they value out of it.

In a country where most people are pessimistic about the future and don't trust the government, where hope is hard to come by, people are longing to believe in something. Religion can offer beliefs, belonging and behaviors all in one place; it can enchant life; most importantly, it tells people that their lives have a purpose. People also want to belong to richer, more robust communities, ones that wrestle with hard questions about how to live. They're looking to heady concepts — confession, atonement, forgiveness, grace and redemption — for answers.

I miss what I had. In leaving the church, I lost access to a community that cut across age and class. I still want it all to be true: miracles, souls, some sort of cosmic alchemy that makes sense of the chaos. For years, I haven't been able to say that publicly. But it feels like something is changing. That maybe the culture is shifting. That maybe we're starting to recognize that it's possible to be both believing and discerning after all.