

Fewer Vermonters report religious affiliation in nationwide survey

A Pew research survey found that 46% of Vermonters aren't part of a religion, one of the highest rates of unaffiliated in the nation. by Erin Petenko. October 9, 2025, 5:56 pm

Doc Bradley grew up in rural Oklahoma and finished his doctorate in Las Vegas before joining the University of Vermont as a professor of politics and religion. When he began teaching here, he was surprised to see that his students were unfamiliar with Christian concepts, like the Trinity or salvation, which seemed well-known elsewhere.

“I had to actually spend a couple of weeks explaining these and the purpose of these, because it's just not ingrained in the culture,” he said.

His observation was backed up by recent data from Pew Research Center. It recently published the results of its Religious Landscape Study — one of the nation's largest surveys of religious beliefs, identities and practices — which found 46% of Vermonters have no religious affiliation, the second-highest rate in the nation.

The number of Vermonters who reported belonging to a religion also fell 9 percentage points between 2014 and the most recent 2023-24 survey.

Almost all of that decline came from a drop in Christians, while the percent reporting they were part of another religion like Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam remained stable.

There are some caveats to the data for Vermont. The state-level survey had an error margin of 7 percentage points, making it hard to draw conclusions about religious groups beyond Christianity. Pew surveyed more than 35,000 people nationwide, including 373 Vermonters, between July 2023 and March 2024.

The survey was also based on self-reported religious identity. Mary Jo Neitz, a sociology researcher at the University of Missouri who has studied religious life, cautioned that the way people describe themselves may have changed over time.

Twenty years ago, someone who was “baptized Presbyterian, but they haven't been in a Presbyterian Church for 30 years,” would have called themselves Presbyterian on a survey, she said. “But now I think those people will say, ‘I'm no religion.’”

However, the decline in Vermont parallels a decadeslong national decline in Christianity found in Pew's survey and other research.

Why the shift? One factor seems to be what demographers call “cohort replacement:” More religious older people are dying off and being replaced by less religious younger people, Boston University professor emerita Nancy Ammerman said. That's being

compounded by **younger generations seeing religion more negatively because of its association with conservative politics and scandals**, she said.

“Parents are not necessarily taking their kids to church or synagogue, and if you’ve grown up without a religious tradition, and all you see in the news about religion is some right-wing politician or some scandal of abuse in the church, that’s not exactly what you want to do with your Sundays,” she said.

From very religious to nonreligious

There was a time when Vermont was one of the most religious states in the nation, Bradley said.

New England and New York were the center of a major religious movement during the Second Great Awakening of the early 19th century, he said. Vermont also produced key religious leaders like Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, and William Miller, the founder of a prominent religious movement at the time known as Millerism.

In the 19th century, Protestant congregations were the focal point of New England communities.

“As Europeans came here, among the first things that happened was that they would establish a congregation ... and so many New England towns have a Congregationalist church sitting right at the center of the town,” Ammerman said.

Churches were also the center of the community in a broader sense.

“If the community needed to gather, needed to deliberate about something, that’s where they went,” Ammerman said.

Religion continued to play a major role in Vermonters’ lives as immigrants brought Catholicism to the state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, she said. Catholicism remains the largest Christian domination in the state; 18% of Vermonters say they are Catholic, according to Pew data.

But the wave of Evangelical Protestantism in the mid-20th century did not make its way to Vermont to the same extent that it did further south, Bradley said. The counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s instead made it more acceptable to not be part of a religious group. He said researchers often liken the United States to a marketplace of religious ideas.

“We see religious groups competing with each other for parishioners, but they have to be in an area where they’ve got willing customers,” Bradley said. **“And I think one of the things**

you see not just here in Vermont, but in a lot of New England, and to a certain extent in the Northwest as well, is you just don't have a customer base."

As a political researcher, Bradley has noticed that religion appears to play less of a role in Vermont politics, particularly when it comes to campaigning.

"If I'm a politician running for office up here in New England, and I say I'm an atheist, or I say religion doesn't matter in politics, that's much more accepted up here," he said.

The Pew survey found **81% of Vermonters believe people do not need to believe in God to be a moral person**, compared to 68% nationwide. Therefore, Vermont politicians do not need to demonstrate their religiosity to claim moral legitimacy like they would elsewhere, Bradley said.

In fact, "it might actually be somewhat detrimental to you here, election-wise, because (of) this perception that religion is now a tool of the right," he said.

Yet that perception may not quite reflect a more nuanced reality. **Conservative Christians are the "backbone" of the Republican Party, but they're actually a relatively small percentage of the national population**, Bradley said.

And in Vermont, Pew data indicates some Christians do have liberal beliefs. While **45% of Vermonters said they were Christian, 84% of Vermonters said homosexuality should be accepted, one of the highest rates in the nation**. That suggests that some Vermont Christians embrace pro-LGBTQ+ views.

More than 80 churches in Vermont describe themselves as LGBTQ+ affirming on gaychurch.org, a resource for finding LGBTQ+ friendly churches.

Bradley said it's not uncommon to pass churches in Vermont hanging rainbow pride flags. "If I want to bring people into the pews ... at least in Burlington, I'm not going to get up on the dias and stand there and say homosexuality is a sin," he said.

Belief beyond belief

At first glance, there's a puzzle in Pew's data about Vermont. Although 46% of Vermonters say they have no religion, only 16% say they are specifically atheist or agnostic. So who are the remaining 30%?

"They're just people who aren't affiliated — it's not that they don't believe," Ammerman said. When you drill down into Pew's questions about beliefs and spirituality, many Vermonters say they do believe in a soul, an afterlife or something spiritual beyond the natural world.

In a state filled with the beauty of nature, Ammerman said she wouldn't be surprised to hear Vermonters say, "I don't need a church. I just go out in the woods."

Yet that category of spirituality without religion leaves a potential gap: The role that religious institutions play in social and civic life, particularly in rural communities.

In Missouri, Neitz conducted research on rural churches that found that they often served as critical points for services as varied as providing winter coats to children and health care access.

She's now part of a research team looking into the ways communities replicate the cultural impact of religious institutions through a secular lens. One example she gave was Death Cafes, a movement of people gathering to openly discuss death and dying.

"If you were a religious person and you wanted to go to the Death Cafe, I don't think they would turn you away," she said. "But I think it's really founded by people who are looking for a community in that circumstance."

There's also been a surge in people connecting with religion or spirituality through social media, particularly since the Covid pandemic, Bradley said. Charismatic religious leaders have increasingly found an audience through the internet instead of, or in addition to, traditional religious services.

"People discovered that they didn't actually have to be in a church for salvation, and that they could have salvation through the internet or through fellowship at home," he said.

He likened it to the rise of preaching through the radio in the 1930s or the rise of televangelism in the 1960s and 1970s.

"When you do have a new media source come up, you usually see an explosion of religiosity using that" medium, he said.

Some early research suggests that Gen Z, particularly Gen Z men, are becoming more religious even if they're not attending church in person, Bradley said. Conservative Christians and Christian nationalists often tailor their online presence to appeal to young men, he said.

At the same time, there's been a rise in the online popularity of New Age, pagan and Wiccan beliefs. Although only 1% of Vermonters described their religion as New Age, Bradley said many of the rituals of New Age practitioners — like witchcraft, tarot or astrology — have simply been absorbed into mainstream society. "You see a lot of people today who are strong Christians, who also look at their horoscope, who also think about psychics or that power," he said.

One thing seems certain: **Religion and its connection to politics will be a part of the national conversation for a long time yet.** "It's kind of impossible to separate religion out of politics here in America in its current state," he said.

"This is one of the least researched areas, and scholars are sometimes kind of afraid to get into it because it can cause so much controversy," Bradley said. "Of course, my classes fill up like crazy."