After the Fact | Faith in America Today

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TRANSCRIPT

[Intro music]

Kathryn Peterson, religious "none": I think I have many questions and many wistful thoughts sometimes. I'm not anti-religion. I just found that things didn't fit. So, I think, all the time, like, I wonder if it will fit again someday.

Dan LeDuc, host: Kathryn Peterson is talking about her religious faith and how it has changed since leaving home and finding her way in the world as a young professional, a wife, and a new mom. She's like a lot of other Americans in her Millennial generation that have drifted from organized religion. In a moment, we'll join a conversation with Kathryn—and her mother, who remains deeply committed to her Catholic faith.

Welcome to After the Fact. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. Religion is a deeply personal topic that might seem hard to reduce to a data point, but that's part of our job here so here we go: America's religion landscape is changing. One of the biggest signs of this is the rapid growth of those who say they have no religious affiliation—the "nones," that's N-O-N-E-S. The Pew Research Center reports that 68 million Americans now identify this way—and that's our data point for this episode.

That 68 million is a significant increase over what it was a decade ago when 39 million Americans identified as "nones."

One of the most striking contrasts in those numbers is the generational divide. While older generations tend to be religiously affiliated, younger ones are increasingly turning away from traditional religious practices.

In a few moments, we'll join the conversation with Kathryn Peterson and her mother, Barb Peterson, who are living through those changes. But first Greg Smith will tell us more about what the Pew Research Center has learned in its surveys of how Americans view religion.

Greg Smith, associate director of research at the Pew Research Center: The United States is a very religious country by a variety of measures. The big majority of the American public, when we ask them about their religion, they tell us they identify with a religion, namely Christianity. Many Americans tell us that they attend religious services regularly. Many Americans tell us that religion is an important part of their lives and that they pray with some regularity. Many Americans say they pray every day, in fact.

If you look and you compare the United States to many other countries in the industrialized world—certainly as compared with Europe—the United States, in many ways, stands out for its high level of religiousness. The United States is quite a religious country by a variety of measures.

Dan LeDuc: But there are some distinct trends going on that spell some changes may be coming.

Greg Smith: Absolutely. The religious landscape of the United States is changing very rapidly. The United States remains a very religious country in a variety of ways. But things are changing. Specifically, we see that the share of Americans who describe themselves as Christians is declining very rapidly. When we first did a big religious landscape study in 2007, something like 78 percent of U.S. adults described themselves as Christians. When we did the study again in 2014, that number had ticked down to 71 percent.

In the political polling that we've conducted most recently, over the last couple of years, the share of Americans who describe themselves as Christians now stands at 65 percent, about two-thirds. So still a majority, but a rapidly declining majority of Americans describe themselves as Christians.

Dan LeDuc: That's an astonishing change.

Greg Smith: It's a very rapid change. It's a very striking change for such an important part of so many people's lives. I've been kind of fascinated to watch this occur in front of our eyes, so to speak.

Dan LeDuc: Right, and as those people say they are no longer Christian—or whatever faith they may have had, because there's been a sort of downtick, I guess, in some other faiths as well—where are the numbers going up?

Greg Smith: Well, you know, it stands to reason. If Christians are declining as a share of the population, then some other religious group or groups must be growing. And in fact, we do see some growth in the share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths. The share of Americans who describe themselves as Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or as members of any number of other faiths has ticked up from about 5 percent a decade ago to 7 percent today.

But the most dramatic growth, the most substantial growth that we see in the U.S. population, is among those people who say they simply have no religion. These are people who, when we ask them "what is your religion," they tell us they are either atheist or agnostic or simply nothing in particular with respect to religion.

A decade ago, the share of Americans who said they have no religion stood at 17 percent. Today, that number stands at 26 percent. More than a quarter of U.S. adults today say they have no religion. That's where the growth is most substantial.

Dan LeDuc: And within that group, again, are the people who don't believe at all? Maybe people who still believe in God but don't associate with a specific religion anymore?

Greg Smith: That's exactly right. The members of this group, the religiously unaffiliated population—a group that we often call the religious "nones"—that's N-O-N-E-S. They're a very diverse and interesting group. The religiously unaffiliated population includes nonbelievers. It includes people who say, "I don't believe in God." It includes people who say, "you know, I'm not sure whether or not I believe in God." But it also includes a large number of people who are not nonbelievers. They are believers. They are not anti-religion. They are simply nothing in particular.

Dan LeDuc: So a "none," again, isn't necessarily an atheist. It's someone who could believe in God and just chooses not to associate with a specific religion.

Greg Smith: That's exactly right. In fact, the data suggests that most religious "nones" do in fact believe in God. Something like 6 in 10 religious "nones" tell us that they believe in God or some kind of a universal spirit or higher power.

Now, to be sure, that figure is lower than what we see among Christians. And actually, it looks like it's declining over time. But still, today, as near as we can tell, most religious "nones" are in fact believers.

Dan LeDuc: A lot of what's driving this, as I understand it, is also generational change. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Greg Smith: There is a huge generational component to the religious change that's underway in the United States. A big part of what's happening is you have older generational cohorts of Americans—people from the Silent Generation, and Baby Boomers—who are by and large, on average, quite religiously observant. So some of what's happening is people, adults—people in their 30s and 40s and 50s—are changing the way they approach religion. They're becoming less religious.

But a big part of what's happening is just generational replacement, a new generation of young adults coming of age with less attachment to religion.

[Transition music]

Dan LeDuc: And now we turn to a conversation about religion and family. We're in the studios today with Kathryn. And her mom is on the phone from Pocatello, Idaho, where she lives. And we're going to talk a little bit about religion in their family life, because a lot of what they're experiencing is what a lot of other Americans are experiencing. And let's begin with Barb. Could you tell us a little bit about your religious background as you grew up, and then we'll give Kathryn her turn.

Barb Peterson, Kathryn's mother and practicing Catholic: I grew up in a family with a traditional situation, with a mom and dad and two older brothers. And I was the

youngest, and of course picked on all the time, I might add. But our situation was that my dad was a career military officer and my mom was a traditional homemaker. As far as religion and our upbringing, my dad really was not affiliated with any religion. And my mom came from a background of Baptist upbringing. And so consequently, when we were moving around every couple of years as a military family, there were periods of time in our early years where we did attend church. And there were significant times when we didn't attend church. When I went away to college, I really didn't feel a calling to any religious persuasion. And although I had a belief in God, I didn't really participate. But in finding and dating my husband, and we evolved to the decision to become married, I was aware that he was a practicing Catholic.

And I eventually made the decision to become a Catholic right after the birth of my first child. And since that time, the impetus for that decision and great benefit of that decision was that we were able to practice, as a family, in the Catholic tradition. That was really a big—I wanted that sense of unity in our family, and I wanted us to participate together in a religion within the church.

Dan LeDuc: And now Kathryn, your mom chose her faith. You were raised this way. Tell us about your own sort of religious journey that's gotten you to your current age of 32, I think you said you are?

Kathryn Peterson, Barb's daughter and religious "none": Well, my parents were very active in our church community. It was never a question of whether we were going to Mass on Sunday. We just went, which never struck me as odd or even particularly problematic when I was growing up. There were a lot of things about going to church that I really loved. I loved the music, and the stories, and most of my friends attended our church because we were enrolled in Catholic school as well. So, it was very much, even as a child, a social circle for me. I was confirmed on the normal schedule and went off to college and joined a parish community there as well.

And that seemed to fit for my first couple years. I found the community to generally be supportive and welcoming. But increasingly, I started to discover some social issues, I guess, with the Catholic faith. You know, I don't know that I necessarily had a crisis of faith over dogma. It was more just finding that my view of the world and my view of how I wanted to live my life seemed to increasingly clash with some of the teachings.

Dan LeDuc: How old were you? Where were you in school at this point?

Kathryn Peterson: I think that this was mostly around my sophomore year. And I think really the major break happened when I studied abroad my junior year. And just when I came back, then, it didn't seem to fit anymore. I no longer really saw a place for myself as an active, practicing Catholic. I think I just ultimately wanted something less constricting. I didn't like the constriction.

Dan LeDuc: When was the first time, coming home on these visits home from school, that maybe you and your folks had a chance to talk about that stuff?

Kathryn Peterson: I can remember being distinctly nervous going to church with my parents and knowing that, while I didn't have a problem going to church and participating as a family, I knew I was not comfortable receiving the Eucharist. And I remember just like, being very nervous, letting the rest of my family walk by, and wondering if I was going to upset my parents or make anyone nervous. But I don't remember really having a conversation about it. It was just, it was more a visual indication to my family that there is a separation here.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah. And Barb, when did you start noticing, maybe, a change.

Barb Peterson: Well, I certainly probably noticed the identical situation that Kathryn was describing, that she definitely was willing to go to church with us when she was home for Christmas holidays, but did not participate in receiving the Eucharist. And quite frankly, I wasn't particularly surprised. We hadn't had a definite conversation about it. But I really kind of understood that that time in life, for everyone, marks a lot of transition, that there is a growth that happens. I just kind of assumed, you know, she's on a journey.

Dan LeDuc: Now, this journey has been going on for over a decade, right? So you're establishing yourself now. You're a mom. Congratulations.

Kathryn Peterson: Oh, thank you.

Dan LeDuc: And you and your husband are not raising your child in a religious faith. So now that the years have gone by, Barb, you remain very active in the church. How do your conversations evolve around all of this now? Your daughter is probably choosing a slightly different path than the one you may have laid out earlier. What's that like for you?

Barb Peterson: I guess I want to emphasize that I really feel that how I feel about my daughter is different than how I feel about every practice that she undertakes, you know, that there is an inherent baseline love and devotion to my daughter, and that not everything that she chooses in her life might be what I would choose for her, but it is her life. I just don't want this difference in our practice to be a cleft in our relationship.

Dan LeDuc: So maybe you guys could even ask each other now sort of where you are in your own individual journeys. Is there stuff you haven't told your mom—or told your mom—about your faith journey?

Kathryn Peterson: I mean, I guess one thing—maybe, Mom, you can give me some advice on this, or you know, I'd be interested in your perspective—one thing that I find that I think about a lot is how to introduce my daughter to my background, being that I no longer identify as a practicing Catholic, but it's still very much a part of my cultural heritage, I guess you could say. So I really struggle with how to share that with her, but also be true to my own doubt and concerns.

Barb Peterson: And you're asking me Kathryn, how to do that?

Kathryn Peterson: Well, I'm just asking, is that something that you thought about? I mean, you were a convert to Catholicism. I guess my confusion is just it seems somewhat easier to explain absolutes than it is to explain things that you're doubtful about. So if I say, "I'm praying but I don't know if anyone's listening"—like that seems confusing to me. Or we do some parts of Christmas, and not other parts. I just struggle a little bit with how to say, "well, this is my background but it's not necessarily where I am right now."

Barb Peterson: My slant would be that, always, honesty is the best policy in that regard. "This is what I learned as a child. I'm not sure about that, though. I have some questions and some confusions." And leaving it at that likely will satisfy a child at some point. And then when they are older and can understand what are those confusions, a deeper level of conversation can ensue.

Dan LeDuc: So Barb, what would you like to ask your daughter?

Barb Peterson: Well, I've given some thought to that. And it occurs to me—well, let me begin by saying that I don't believe that people should speak from the grave. Or after death, that they shouldn't seek to control what happens after they're gone. But my hope is that my children would want a funeral that would reflect who I am as a religious woman. Because that was who I am. And so I would ask Kathryn, how do you feel about that?

Kathryn Peterson: Well, I feel like I hope that's a long, long ways off.

Barb Peterson: Well, I hope so, too.

Kathryn Peterson: I don't know that it would ever occur to me not to have a Catholic funeral for you. I mean, for the reason that you point out that it is your faith and your beliefs. But also the fact that it's my history, too. Even if it's not something that I practice now, I do feel like I have a feeling of familiarity and comfort with the Catholic religion. And I think that at a time of a loss and looking for healing, that that would be incredibly comforting to me, even if it wouldn't be something that I would necessarily look to on other days of my life.

Dan LeDuc: Barb, I'm just curious. You are clearly a woman of deep faith and deep beliefs, which are to be admired. And then to hear doubts from one of your children, does it ever make you want to rethink anything for yourself?

Barb Peterson: I don't think we're ever a finished product. I think that we are constantly evolving, and learning, and understanding, and deepening our understanding. I think when questions arise for myself in my mind, or in my work group, or in my family group, or whatever it is, it gives me pause, it makes me reflect, it causes me to look deeper, and maybe seek clarification. And so I feel like that deeper understanding, that enriching of my understanding my faith is ever-evolving.

Dan LeDuc: I'm just curious, Kathryn, do you feel like your journey is still continuing, or are you finding yourself reaching conclusions by choosing not to engage in your faith on a regular basis?

Kathryn Peterson: I mean, I would say, on a day to day, I don't know that I really think that deeply about it. You know, days are full of work, and transit, and child care. But I think I have many questions and many wistful thoughts sometimes. I'm not anti-religion. I just found that things didn't fit. So I think, all the time, like, I wonder if it will fit again someday. And I'm changing, so it's possible I could change enough that it would. Or sometimes I wonder if the church will change enough that it fits me. And I don't know the answer to that. I know there's a lot of people who identify as Catholic who are not necessarily practicing or practicing at a more minor level. And that works for those people, it just didn't necessarily work for me. I wanted to be all in or not in. And it just felt very disingenuous to be in that community, but not buying in necessarily. So I guess it is a respect thing.

Dan LeDuc: Barb, that Sunday experience and the other activities you do is quite meaningful to you. That's a community for you, right?

Barb Peterson: Absolutely. The community is probably one of the highlights for me. Not feeling like I'm a lone person in the wilderness. And I'm counting on the support of others to reinforce me, just as I'm called to reinforce them.

Dan LeDuc: It's an interesting point you make about comfort. I was just curious, Kathryn, where do you turn for comfort well, if you feel yourself sort of less religious—still spiritual, but—

Kathryn Peterson: Oh, to people. I mean, I still have my tribe. Of course my husband, I'm very close with my sister, I'm very close with my mom. So I'm turning to people, but it's a, I guess, different flavor to the conversation.

Dan LeDuc: Both of you took the Pew Research Center's religious typology quiz. Do you remember what your final categories came out as?

Kathryn Peterson: *[chuckles]* I think mine was religious-resistant, which seemed a little bit more aggressive than I was expecting.

Dan LeDuc: OK. And Barb.

Barb Peterson: Well, not surprisingly, I'm a stalwart.

Dan LeDuc: Hm. Anything else you wanted to ask?

Barb Peterson: No. I think that you've given us lots of opportunities to talk to one another. And I think that Christmas this year, we maybe will have more conversation.

Dan LeDuc: I hope so. I hope so. Well, again, thank you both so very, very much.

Kathryn Peterson: Of course.

Barb Peterson: Thank you.

Kathryn Peterson: Love you, mom.

Barb Peterson: I love you, too, sweetheart.

[Transition music]

Dan LeDuc: As we enter this holiday season, which is a spiritual and religious time for so many, we want to wish you the best and thank you for listening and to again offer a special thanks to Kathryn and Barb Peterson for talking with us.

As always, you can go to pewtrusts.org/afterthefact for a look at the data we discussed here and to take the Pew Research Center's religious typology quiz. And if you like what you've heard in this episode please give us a review on Stitcher, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Pandora, or wherever you listen.

We'll be listening to a couple of fan favorites as the holidays approach, so stay tuned to hear from some special guests on episodes they selected. And a happy holiday season from all of us here.

(Female voice over music): After the Fact is produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts.