

Study: Religious diversity increases in America, yet perceptions of Christian nation intensify

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While America continues to become more religiously diverse, the belief that America is a Christian nation is growing more intense, according to research from Purdue University.

"America is still predominantly Christian, but it is more diverse than ever," said Jeremy Brooke Straughn, an assistant professor of sociology who studies national identity. "At the same time, many people feel even more strongly that America is a Christian country than they did before the turn of the century. This is especially true for Americans who say they are [Christians](#) and who attend [religious services](#) at least once a week."

The fact that these beliefs have intensified since the mid-1990s suggests a connection to events such as the Sept. 11 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Straughn said.

"We suspect that these events accentuated the connection between Christianity and American identity by reinforcing boundaries against non-Christians and people of foreign origin," he said. "Although we can't be certain of the underlying causes, our data clearly show diverging attitudes between American Christians and their non-Christian counterparts here in the United States. Those who express these views might say the belief is rooted in love of country and religion and is not about hating or discouraging others. But voicing these beliefs may cause

others to feel that they do not belong and to withdraw from participating in public life."

Straughn and co-author Scott L. Feld, a professor of sociology, looked at two waves of [public opinion](#) data from the General Social Survey, which was collected by the National Opinion Research Center. They found that between 1996 and 2004 the percentage of people who said Christian faith was a very important attribute of being "truly American" rose by more than 11 percentage points, from about 38 percent to 50 percent. The findings are published in the current issue of the journal *Sociology of Religion*.

This trend coincides with a steady increase in religious diversity, with Protestants suffering the greatest relative losses. Although Christians still account for about 78 percent of the adult population, the share of Protestants has fallen from more than 60 percent in the early 1990s to 50 percent in 2006.

"Religious boundaries can be politically divisive," Straughn said. "And this is important to take note of as we approach the November elections. Religion and national identity continue to be in the news, from questions about President Barack Obama's religion to the recent controversy about an Islamic center near the Sept. 11 site.

"Even when voters seem focused on problems like the economy and unemployment, the issue of religion and national identity could make a difference at the margins. Especially in close races, the advantage may go to candidates seen as committed to the values of American Christians."

Provided by Purdue University

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