Are Americans losing faith in religious leaders?

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Americans have significantly less confidence in their religious leaders than they did a generation ago and more than two-thirds would prefer they not dabble in politics, according to a new book by a Duke University professor.

This loss of confidence patterns similar declines in respect for leaders in government, education, banking and other walks of life, and may help illustrate why fewer Americans are themselves interested in joining the clergy, says Mark Chaves, a Duke professor of sociology, religion and divinity.

And while a perception exists that Americans have become more religious of late, data suggest the opposite, says Chaves, whose new book, "American Religion: Contemporary Trends," goes on sale Aug. 21.

Chaves' research found that between 1973 and 2008, the percentage of people with great confidence in religious leaders declined from 35 percent to less than 25 percent.

"The American public has lost confidence in leaders of all sorts," Chaves says. "But the loss of confidence in religious leaders has been more precipitous than in other leaders. There used to be a surplus of confidence in religious leaders that is no longer there."

That loss of confidence is in part connected to the Catholic Church scandal of the early 2000s, when media reports illustrated the

irresponsible handling by Catholic leaders of abusive priests, Chaves says.

In his book, Chaves analyzes developments in American religion since 1972. Using data derived mainly from two national surveys, he examines trends in diversity, belief, involvement, congregational life, leadership, liberal Protestant decline and polarization.

The General Social Survey is an ongoing survey of Americans' changing attitudes and behavior that began in 1972; the National Congregations Study, which Chaves directed, surveyed American congregations across the religious spectrum.

Using these and other sources, Chaves challenges the popular belief that religion has enjoyed a surge in popularity in the United States. In fact, traditional religious belief and practice are either stable or in decline, he says.

The public misperception is fed in part by the rise of very visible mega-churches, which suggest that more people are actively religious than is actually true, he adds.

"A 2,000-person church is far more visible than 10 200-person churches," Chaves says.

Among Chaves' other findings:

-- There is a declining, though still very high, belief in God. In the 1950s, 99 percent of Americans said they believed in God; in 2008, about 92 percent did.

-- Americans attend church less often than they say they do. About 25 percent of Americans attend religious services, which is lower than the

35 to 40 percent who claim to do so.

-- Fewer Americans today approve of their religious leaders getting involved in politics. In 1991, about 30 percent of Americans strongly agreed that religious leaders should avoid political involvement; by 2008, 44 percent felt that way.

-- Religion and politics are more closely intertwined than a generation ago.

"Several decades ago there was not a strong correlation between how religiously active you were and whether you voted Republican or Democrat," Chaves says. "Now, there is. If you're religiously active, you're now more likely to vote Republican. That's a very important development and is part of what leads people to talk about increasing polarization in American society."

Provided by Duke University

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