

Study shows faith is fluid in U.S.

A new map of faith in the United States shows a nation constantly shifting amid religious choices, unaware or unconcerned with doctrinal distinctions. Unbelief is on the rise. And immigration is introducing new faces in the pews, new cultural concerns, new forces in the public square.

The “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” released today by the Pew Forum on religion & Public Life, documents new peaks, deepening valleys and fast-running rivers of change in American religiosity.

Based on interviews with 35,556 adults, it shows so much diversity and dynamism that a co-author sums it up simply. “Churn. Churn. Churn. The biggest news here is change,” says Pew Forum research fellow Gregory Smith.

‘It’s not that religion won’t matter in the future, but that it will matter in new and less predictable ways,” says co-author John Green, a political scientist and Pew Forum senior fellow.

Key findings from the survey:

- Faith is fluid: 44 percent say they’re no longer tied to the religions or secular upbringing of their childhood. They’ve changed religions or denominations, adopted a faith for the first time or abandoned any affiliation altogether.
- “Nothing” matters: 12.1 percent say their religious identity is “nothing in particular,” out-ranking every denomination and tradition except Catholics (23.9 percent) and all groups of Baptists (17.2 percent).
- Protestants are fading: 51.3 percent still call themselves Protestant, but roughly one third of this group were “unable or unwilling” to describe their denomination.
- Immigrants sustain Catholic numbers: 46 percent of foreign-born U.S. adults are Catholics, compared with only 21 percent of native-born adults. Latinos are now 45 percent of all U.S. Catholics ages 18-29.

Like the Catholic Church, other public institutions will have to accommodate the impact of immigration. Already, more than 34 million of the nation’s 225 million adults are foreign-born, and half of these are Hispanic, according to the U.S. Census.

“The Catholic Church may be a microcosm of what’s going to happen to the country in the next 40 years,” says Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum.

The Pew survey was based on random telephone interviews conducted in English and Spanish May 8 through Aug. 13.

Another 1,050 interviews were added from an earlier 2007 Pew-sponsored survey of Muslims in the United States, which included interviews in Arabic, Farsi and Urdu.

The margin of error is +/- 0.6 percentage points for the full sample, but higher for sub-groups.