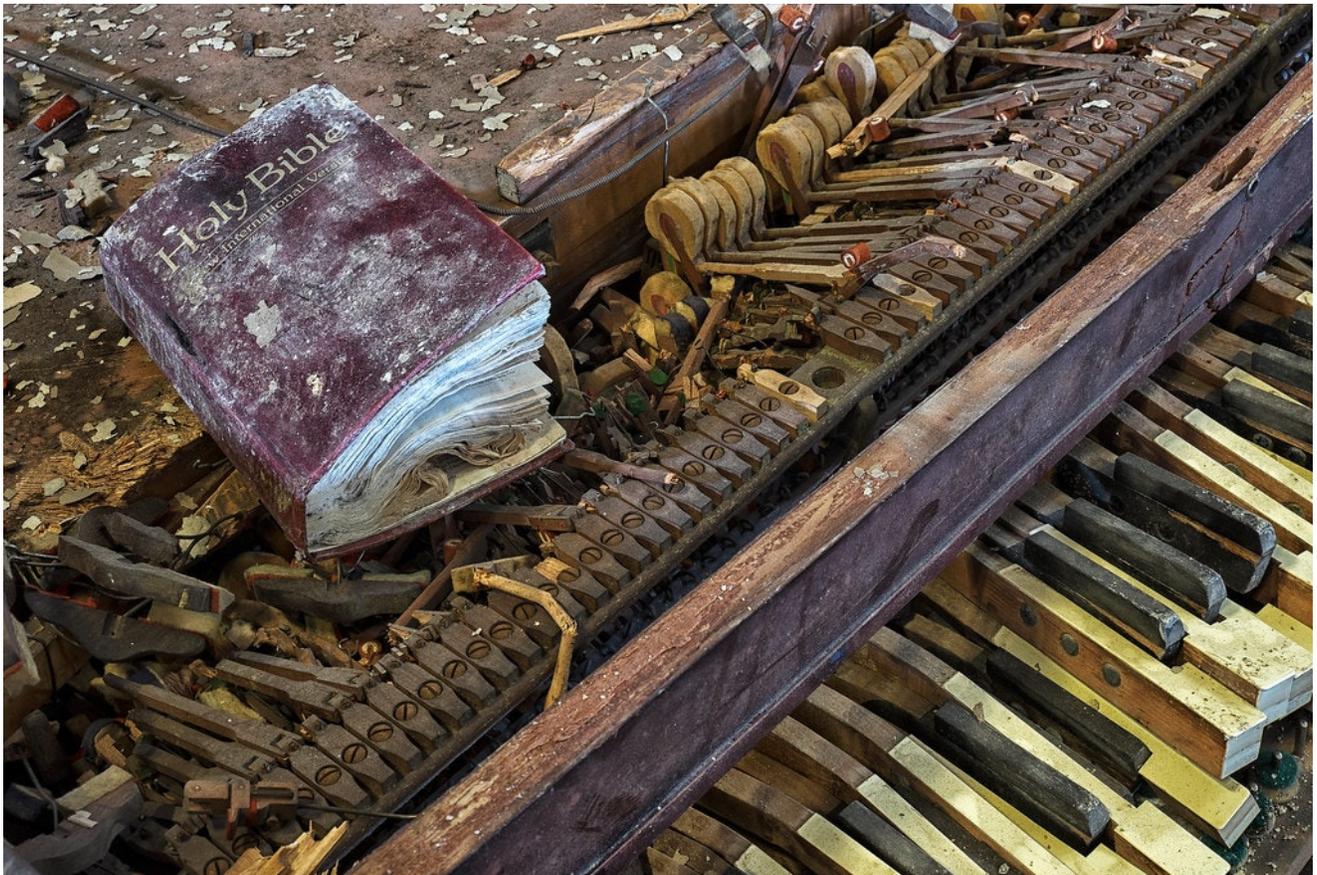


# Contra French on Christianity's Decline

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## Has America become a more Christian society as Americans have become less Christian?

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"Bible and piano, abandoned church, Detroit, MI" by Timothy Neesam

David French, from his current position as a lightning rod, writes a lot about scandal and sin within his own evangelical-Protestant community, in ways that add to the amount of grief that he gets from conservatives who feel like he's directing way too much fire inward at a time when his tradition is embattled and threatened from without.

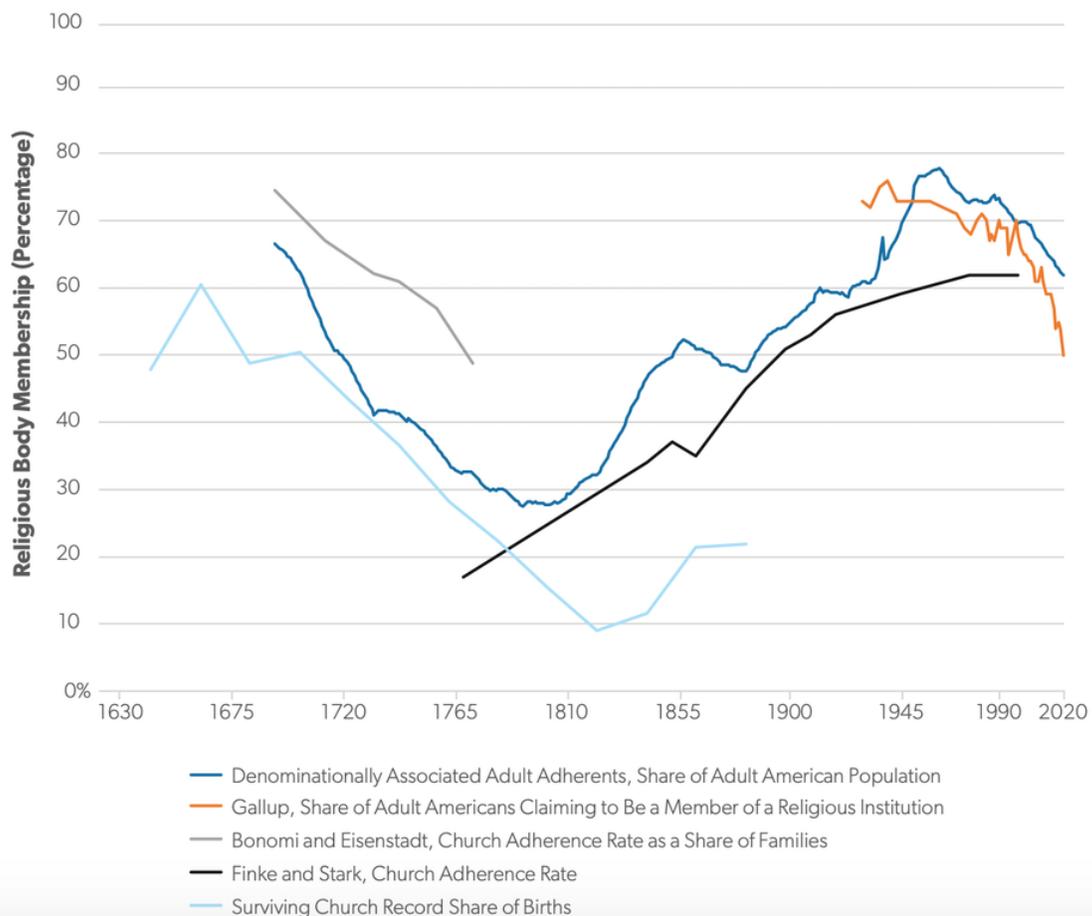
I think French's work on this front is very important, for reasons connected to my specific experience as a Catholic journalist watching the church's scandals unfold, and my general sense that any kind of Christian renewal in the Western world requires serious internal

purification in the service of revival. And I wanted to offer that praise and endorsement first, because now I'm going to write about a new piece where I think French's critique of his own community goes astray.

The title of the new essay is "A Nation of Christians is Not Necessarily A Christian Nation," and it covers a lot of important ground — the historical failings of white Protestants, the complexities involved in the idea of a Christian society, and the heretical perils of a certain kind of Christian nationalism. But the central provocation that has two prongs. First, that "America has become more just—and thus closer to the ideals one would expect of a Christian nation—as white Protestant power has waned. The United States of 2022 is far more just than it was in 1822 or 1922 or 1952 or even 1982." And therefore, that a lot of Christian anxiety, and especially white evangelical Protestant anxiety, about the decline or crisis of American Christianity just reflects "a longing for a past we shouldn't seek to recover [and a] panic over a present that is still laden with privilege."

I want to frame my doubts about this argument using the following chart, taken from Lyman Stone's examination of religious trends in American life that AEI (where I am a visiting fellow) published last year:

**Figure 4. Membership in Religious Bodies as a Percentage of Americans**



This is a chart of all religious bodies, not just Protestant or white Protestant churches, and it's a chart of religious adherence, not "cultural power" per se. But given the overwhelming Protestant-ness of historical American religion — as late as 1965 almost 70 percent of Americans were Protestant, and every other successful faith was Protestantized to one degree or another — I think a chart like this gives you a decent sense of the arc of Protestant cultural influence across U.S. history: Not a steady state but a long-term ascent, punctuated by the 19th century Awakenings and the post-World War II revival, until the 1960s when something shifted and de-Christianization began.

In his essay French defines a *truly* Christian nation, the ideal type not just the jingoistic version, as a country that combines "a robust private practice of faith with a government that is committed to basic elements of justice and mercy." And you can certainly look at the long period of Protestant power charted above and emphasize all the ways that American Christians and American politics fell short of that exacting standard, all the ways that white supremacy especially deformed the public order, and all the ways — as French particularly stresses — that American Protestants fought with one another over fundamental questions of justice rather than simply joining hands to serve the commonweal.

But in other contexts, when "white Protestantism" isn't in the dock, I'm pretty sure if you asked French whether America changed for the better or the worse, became more just or less so, between 1776 and 1965, he would say *better* and *more just*. If you asked him what actually happened to make America better and more just, I suspect he would talk about the waves of reform that swept American society periodically from the Founding era onward — the birth of small-d democratic politics, the rise of abolitionism, the various forms of industrial-era social reform, the assimilation of vast numbers of immigrants, the push for women's suffrage, and so on down to the New Deal era and the civil rights movement. And if you looked at the history of most of those movements you would see not just Protestant influence on their efforts but a correlation with the Protestant *growth* charted above — as the churching of America, the periods of revivalism and renewal, very often coincided with ages of political reform.

In other words, in the history of the United States from the American Revolution to Martin Luther King Jr. you see two things happening together: the private practice of faith becomes pretty steadily more robust, and the government becomes more committed to what most of us, religious and not, now consider basic elements of justice and mercy. Over this multi-generational process, you could reasonably say that America remained manifestly imperfect but came *closer*, however lurchingly, to the combination of widespread personal faith and greater political justice that French argues characterizes the Christian society.

That this happened, quite often, through conflict *between* Protestants (*both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God*, etc.) is undeniable but not, it seems to me, a particularly telling critique: In a heavily Protestant society how else would change come? That over time the progress of reform increasingly involved Catholics, Jews, non-believers is undeniable, as

is the fact that on civil rights especially white Protestants often had to be dragged toward justice by black Protestants — and as a non-Protestant I have no interest in overpraising my separated brethren.

But still: If the chart above showed Christian practice *falling* throughout successive ages of pre-1970s reform that would be clearly taken as a sharp indictment of American Christianity. So the fact that it shows the exact opposite suggests that maybe our Protestant forebears deserve a little more than French's brush-off comment that "if our history teaches us anything, it is that we cannot equate Christian power with Christian justice." We can't *simply* equate the two, no — but in the history of 19th and early 20th century America, the conjoined increases in Christian practice and Christian political activism suggests that we can't simply separate them either.

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So then we come to the last fifty years, when French suggests that a separation of faith and justice has happened, and America has become a "far" more just society in *Christian* terms even as it's become much less Protestant, less overtly Christian, less institutionally religious. This is asserted rather than argued at length, so as an invitation to further debate I'd like to offer four reasons to be skeptical of this claim.

First, if you don't touch conservative critiques of contemporary society, if you just stick with liberal and left-wing perspectives on our situation, there's a widespread sense that the 1960s were the last great breakthrough period for American progress, and that the gains since then for individual freedom and social justice (again, defined as liberals see it) have been balanced by various forms of tragic regress, plutocratic evil, structural breakdown. So I'm not sure there's even a secular-liberal consensus that the recent years of Christian and Protestant decline have been years of unalloyed progress to match what we associate with our more-religious past. And certainly both contemporary socialism and woke progressivism are infused with a quasi-religious energy that feels like an attempt to resuscitate the moralistic idealism that Protestantism once imparted to American reformers.

Second, you have the religious-conservative critique of post-Sixties America, some parts of which French presumably endorses — that a lot of recent moral progress (declining racism and sexism, above all) is counterbalanced by the injustices associated with the 1970s-era breakdown of family and community and social order, the more recent rise in depression and suicidality and drug addiction, and most importantly the abortion regime of *Roe* and *Casey*. It's true that French is a longtime critic of the most extreme form of this "conservative cultural defeatism," arguing that lots of trends — abortion rates, crime rates, religious liberty — actually turned in the right direction under the influence of the pre-Trump conservative movement. So he has more reason to regard the post-1960s period positively than some others on the right. But even French's case against conservative defeatism is often a case that things have gotten better since the worst disintegration of the '70s, that they've *recovered* rather than absolutely improved, and the recovery he's describing is only partial on a lot of fronts. For instance, crime rates and incarceration rates (arguably interrelated forms of

injustice, the wound and the tourniquet) began to fall in the mid-1990s and then the late 2000s, respectively, but neither had returned to the levels of mid-century America even before the recent pandemic-era disorders — and now a return to, say, the crime-and-prison patterns of 1955 seems even further out of reach.

(I also think that on some fronts — sex and family especially — French is mistaking real moral renewal for the sterile peace of decadence, but you know where to find that argument.)

Third, you have the theological question of whether religious practice, regular prayer and honor to God, isn't itself an important form of justice, whose decline matters to any assessment of the justice inherent in a given society. This obviously doesn't matter to secular analysts, but from the Christian perspective a society where religious practice is declining steeply is a society where several major commandments are no longer being consistently upheld. I'm not sure how French weighs this issue on his scales, but given his own theological premises it has to have real weight.

Finally, I read almost everything French writes, and I don't think he himself is very happy with the state of American society circa 2022. Quite the contrary: He sees a nation threatened by authoritarianisms on the right and left, even in peril of imminent break-up. Surely that diagnosis has some bearing on the question of whether the country is coming ever-closer to the ideals of a Christian society; surely it suggests that, well, maybe it's going a little bit in the opposite direction?

I think I understand why French doesn't want to *say* that — because from his perspective part of what's pulling the country apart is a poisonous nostalgia, and if you say that it was better for the country to be more religious then you're conceding ground to the toxic Christian-nationalist nostalgists.

But I also think it's possible to say two things at once: First, that a certain amount of Christian reaction, maybe white evangelical Christian reaction especially, to Christianity's decline has indeed been toxic, counterproductive, bad religion and the opposite of gospel witness, but also that the decline itself is something that Christians (and not only them) have good reasons to lament.

So by all means, tell your co-religionists that the church's decline reflects God's judgment on Christian sins and failures, and that Providence is calling them to purification and renewal and not just a truculent war footing behind the shield of Emperor Trump.

But if you tell them they can't lament secularization or religious disaffiliation or the collapse of the old Protestant center on *any* grounds, that they can't look at the ebbing of their own faith, the loss of American belief in what they consider the true story of the world, and see something regrettable and tragic and bad for the country in the long run, then that plays into the hands of the toxic avengers, because they're the only ones saying the obvious: That for all our ample sins and failures, Christians are not obliged to celebrate our own decline.

  
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