

Fewer in N.C. claim a religion

Study: South is home to more faiths

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While most North Carolinians remain Protestants of varying types, a broad new survey of religious affiliation shows a startling growth in the number of people who claim no particular faith.

The survey of 35,000 Americans by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life says 12 percent of North Carolinians have no religious affiliation. That's still less than the national average of 16 percent but double that of Mississippi and other Southern states that have formed the so-called Bible Belt.

And the study, released Monday, suggests that religious hegemony in the South is cracking. No longer is the entire region dominated by traditional Protestant denominations such as Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians. Instead, the South is emerging as two regions -- the deep South, which is still very traditional, and the new South, which increasingly looks like the rest of the country.

In Virginia, Georgia and Florida, the trend toward religious diversity is even more apparent.

Scholars suggest growth is a big reason for the growing number of North Carolinians who claim no denominational alliance. The state's newest members come from regions of the country, such as the West and Northeast, which are far less religious.

While the ranks of unaffiliated have grown, the increase does not signal a rise in the numbers of agnostics or atheists. In fact, among those who have no religious affiliation, a greater percentage said religion was an important part of their lives than those who said they were non-believers. These may be people who say they're spiritual, not religious.

"What seems to be on the rise is some inclination to be suspicious of institutions," said Thomas Tweed, a professor of religion at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Timothy Roy, a 32-year-old coffee house manager in downtown Raleigh, said he considers himself unaffiliated with a religion and is more comfortable thumbing the spirituality tomes at Borders than going to church.

"I've been to all sorts of groups, but when we start discussing spiritual things, I feel like a fake," he said.

Roy, who grew up Roman Catholic, became an atheist while in his teens. Now he's drawn to Eastern philosophies and takes an interest in the paranormal.

Evangelicals in South

In other ways, the Pew survey shows the South remains overwhelmingly Protestant, and with far more evangelicals than any other region.

Greg Smith, a research fellow at the Pew Forum, said one in three Southerners claimed to be evangelical Christians, which includes Baptists, Pentecostals, and nondenominational groups. "That's 11 points higher than in any other region," he said.

But here, too, there were regional differences. The percentage of North Carolinians who identify themselves as evangelical Christians was lower than in many other parts of the South, at 41 percent, compared with 51 percent in Tennessee and 53 percent in Arkansas.

The Pew survey found that 9 percent of North Carolinians called themselves Roman Catholic, but some questioned whether there weren't additional Catholics who are immigrant Hispanics who may not have been counted. The survey was conducted in both English and Spanish.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Raleigh, which spans 54 counties in the eastern half of North Carolina, estimates the number of Hispanic Catholics is larger than the number of Anglo Catholics. Russ Elmayer, the chief operating officer for the diocese, said there were 210,000 registered Catholics and an estimated 225,000 unregistered, mostly Hispanic Catholics who regularly show up for Mass but don't fill out membership forms.

Nationwide, the Catholic Church has lost more people to other religions than any other single religious group. But those numbers were offset by a significant number of Catholics who have immigrated to the United States from Mexico, Central America and Latin America. Half of all immigrants, the survey found, were Catholic.

Among this religiously diverse stew, many North Carolinians of no faith said they were perfectly happy living in the South and have never felt any discrimination for their lack of faith.

"If I lived in a place other than Durham, I might feel different," said Rob Nichols, 55, of Durham, who said he's never been asked if he goes to church. "If you're thinking about spiritual questions, it seems like what traditional religion offers is not very satisfying," he said.

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