

### Religious Mobility: Why do people switch their religion/faith?

A very prominent and relevant issue is the decision for someone to change his or her current faith/religion. Many people are raised to believe in a certain religion but end up changing their faith at some point in their lifetime. Specifically, about 50% of American adults have changed their religion at least once (Faith in Flux, 1). Those who change their religion usually do so prior to age 24, also usually switching more than one time (Faith in Flux, 1). Researchers have studied various religious denominations in order to determine the cause of religious mobility. The main motivating factors such as one's current marital status, a change in education, and a change geography have led to the decision for people to switch their faith and religion.

A study was conducted at Duke University regarding the extent of switching religions based on marriage (Musick, Wilson 257). For this study, a survey was used based on a sample of around 13,000 families mainly consisting of people who have been married two or more times (Musick, Wilson 259). The survey supported that liberal denominations, such as Episcopalians, have a greater chance of switching to a more modest/traditional Protestant group when marriage is the motivation (Musick, Wilson 268). After marriage occurs, sect-like Pentecostals are likely to be more concentrated on conservative groups, such as Christians and Baptists. Liturgical Protestant groups, such as the Lutherans, have a higher chance of losing affiliates from marriage than any other factor (Musick, Wilson 268). The study also found that Catholics have a better chance of leaving a religion all together if they are switching because of marriage, instead of

converting to their wife's Protestant faith. Another survey was conducted by gathering data from young adults that grew up Presbyterian (Hoge, Johnson, et al. 253). Hoge and Johnson aimed to find the driving factors for the decision to switch religions. The four main motives that they concluded from their results are interfaith marriage, switching after moving and looking for a new church, switching because of a lack of satisfaction with Presbyterian teachings, and switching due to personal ties (Hoge, Johnson, et al. 253). From the survey given, 32% of the total sample transferred their religious affiliation at least once, with 9% changing at least two times (Hoge, Johnson, et al. 254). Results found that transferring denominations was due to interfaith marriage more than any other reason. When marriage was the reason for the switch, the majority of the time it was due to the spouse's religion (Hoge, Johnson, et al. 255). Also, the majority of people included in the study transferred their religious affiliation around the time that they got married. Hadaway and Marler conducted a study containing information suggesting that when marriage is the motivation for switching one's religion, partners usually change towards similarity (Hadaway, Marler 99). Furthermore, couples that switch and are not alike in denomination typically move towards a steady denominational preference, and couples that have the same denomination before marriage are improbable to switch at all (Hadaway, Marler 99).

Parental divorce is a big motivation for someone to switch his or her current faith/religion. Lawton and Bures used data originating from the National Survey of Family and Households to determine the validity of their hypothesis (Lawton, Bures 99). They proposed that converting religions is more likely for children that undergo a divorce

in the family than for families that stay together (Lawton, Bures 99). Results from the study support their hypothesis, as going through a parental divorce as a child increases the chance of changing religions by about 62% (Lawton, Bures 104). One of the specific models given from the study shows the extent of parental divorce for families that are raised Catholic (Lawton, Bures 105). Children raised Catholic who experience a divorce in the family are 1.7 times more likely to switch to a moderate Protestant denomination versus remaining Catholic (Lawton, Bures 106). Also, Catholics that go through a divorce are 2.6 times more likely to transfer to a conservative Protestant group, and 2.2 times as likely to abandon the religion all together. If divorce happens as a parent, there is more than twice the likelihood of switching from being Catholic to a conservative protestant group, or abandoning the religion all together (Lawton, Bures 106). For moderate Protestants, divorce during childhood doubles the chance that they will transfer to become a Catholic. This proposes that moderate Protestants that have experienced a divorce usually search for a deeper religious affiliation and community. For conservative Protestants, divorce during childhood is strongly correlated to a higher likelihood of switching to a more moderate Protestant denomination, or dropping the religion all together (Lawton, Bures 106). Overall, the study Lawton and Bures conducted shows a very strong and steady relationship between switching one's religion for Protestants and Catholics who experienced a parental divorce. Additionally, it was concluded that the effect of a divorce is seen more for Catholics than Protestants.

Education is a driving factor for switching religious denominations. Sharon Sandomirsky and John Wilson conducted research at Duke University in order to

determine the causes of religious mobility (Sandomirsky, Wilson 1211). They gathered data from a sample of men and women from their junior and senior years of high school in 1965-1966 (Sandomirsky, Wilson 1218). They followed up on these same people 13 years later, when they were around ages 28-31. This follow up occurred in the late 1960's and early 1970's, which was a key part of this study as this was after the religious revival that occurred in the 1950's (Sandomirsky, Wilson 1218). The majority of participants left the religious affiliation that they were in during high school by age 30 (Sandomirsky, Wilson 1219). They found that educational level certainly influences religious mobility (Sandomirsky, Wilson 1224). If someone is striving for better educational skills, better literacy, organization skills, etc., then they are more likely to switch into a more committed religion, or become more committed in their current religion (Sandomirsky, Wilson 1219). For instance, families that are more committed Mormon's are the one's who typically have a better occupation and education (Sandomirsky, Wilson 1224). The United Church Board for Homeland Ministries found that people who switch into a more Liberal denomination have a higher chance of being more educated versus the people who stayed in their past denomination (Hadaway, Marlor 98). A higher education leads to an increased amount of religious attendance (Glaeser, 1). In America, around 50% of college graduates that were born after 1945 attend church at least several times per year (Glaeser, 2). Dropouts from that time period only attend church 36% of the time. The Harvard Institute of Economic Research explains that those who have more of an education are taught more information on social behavior, and social behavior leads to more religious attendance (Glaeser, 17).

Therefore, it can be concluded that those who become more educated are likely to attend their current religious affiliation more, or will make the switch to start attending a certain denomination. As the argument is made that a higher level of education leads to a higher church attendance, Glaeser and Sacerdote also present the idea that education and religious attendance is also a negatively correlated (Glaeser, Sacerdote 3). That is, more education can lead to people switching into less devoted religions. He suggests that this is because the more someone is educated, then the more that they will lose their religious belief. Going off of this, the less educated are more likely to believe in miracles, heaven, devils, etc. (Glaeser, Sacerdote 6). This will lead to people choosing denominations that best fit their current belief, so if one becomes more educated then they will probably choose a denomination that has less beliefs in certain things like miracles and heaven. In the Harvard study, the variable “belief in miracles” has a 79% correlation with attendance, and a 78% correlation with education (Glaeser, Sacerdote 13). The overall idea that came out of these studies is that those who are more educated are potentially affiliated with denominations with low beliefs because the higher educated are more likely to switch to these types of denominations. Also, those who become educated are also just as likely to switch into more committed religious denominations as they are gaining things like social skills.

Geography is a big motivational factor when it comes to being loyal to a religious denomination. Roger Stump conducted a study with the goal of determining the relationship between regional migration and religious commitments in the United States (Stump, 292). Data was collected from the eight surveys originating from the General

Social Surveys (NORC). The people for the study were split up into different regions consisting of the Northeast region, the Midwest, the South Atlantic, and the West (Stump, 293). The impact of migration was measured by associating the degree of commitment for migrants along with non-migrants. Stump found that the southern region of America has the strongest degree of commitment for white Protestants, while the Midwest has the highest levels of commitment of Lutherans (Stump, 294). The Midwest has the largest degree of commitment from Catholics as well. Conclusions were made that all White Protestant groups migrating to the south have a larger degree of commitment. Methodists that move to the Southern region were found to have a higher chance of being less committed than Baptist migrants. Also, the rate of church attendance decreases for white migrants to the west, but black migrants to the west show a very little decrease in religious commitment (Stump, 296). Additionally, Hadaway and Marler explained that people living in the West have a higher chance of staying in their current denomination because the West has more migrants than any other region (Hadaway, Marler 107).

The main hypothesis that was supported by this information is that varying levels of religious commitment for migrants is associated with different regional standards regarding religion. Those moving to areas that are associated with expectations of a stronger level of commitment usually switch to denominations with higher levels of commitment (Stump, 302). Contrary, people moving into a region where religious commitment is less of a norm are more likely to switch into a less committed denomination, or drop their religion all together. The main takeaway is that with different regions comes different culture and attitudes towards religion. These varying

levels of attitude towards religion can lead to people switching their denomination as a result of moving to a new region.

After researching into the motivational factors of religious mobility, I have been able to find substantial evidence supporting my thesis. It is clear that the religion a person practices could very well be the result of life experiences such as marriage, moving to a new location, and getting a better education. It was interesting to see how the extent of religious mobility was different for certain denominations. For instance, Liberals have a high chance of switching to a more moderate protestant group when marriage is the reason, while Pentecostals are more likely to switch to more conservative groups. Also, Catholics are affected more by a parental divorce than are Protestants. Just like many years in the past, people will continue to make decisions regarding whether to keep practicing their current faith and religion, or to start a new one. Statistically speaking, a large amount of the American population will continue to switch their religious affiliation at least once in their lifetime, with a very high likelihood for the reason being in regards to marriage, moving homes, and the level of education.

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