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Americans who leave their childhood religion typically do so by the age of 30, with just under half saying they stopped believing their former religion's teachings.

For Catholics, retention rates tend to be significantly lower than for other faiths, while former Catholics cite varying reasons for leaving the church, depending upon their current religious affiliation — or lack thereof.

And on balance, having positive childhood experiences of religion and growing up with regular religious practices both play a significant role in adult retention of childhood religious identity.

Those were among the findings released Dec. 15 by Pew Research Center in a report titled "Why Do Some Americans Leave Their Religion While Others Stay?"

Pew drew on data from a May 5-11 survey of 8,937 U.S. adults who are part of the center's American Trends Panel and from the center's 2023-2024 Religious Landscape Study, representing 36,908 U.S. adults.

Overall, slightly more than half (56%) of U.S. adults still identify with their childhood religion, with 35% reporting they have "moved on from the religion of their youth," said Pew.

Another 9% "weren't raised in a religion and still don't have one today," said the report.

Pew found that retention rates for Catholics (57%) — who comprise 19% of U.S. adults — were much lower than those for Hindus (82%), Muslims (77%), Jews (76%) and Protestants (70%), although somewhat higher than for Latter-day Saints (54%) and Buddhists (45%).

In addition, said Pew, "14% of Americans raised Catholic are now Protestant," representing 4% of all U.S. adults. Pew's Religious Landscape Study found that 13% of U.S. adults are former Catholics.

Broadly, the top reason cited for leaving a childhood religion was no longer believing in the religion's teachings — with 46% of former Catholics pointing to that loss of belief for their decision to leave the faith.

Other reasons given by former Catholics for walking away were clergy and religious leader scandals (39%) and dissatisfaction with church teachings on social and political issues (37%).

Another 35% of former Catholics pointed to a gradual drifting away from their religion — slightly less than the report's overall share of 38%.

Equal shares of former Catholics said that their religion "just wasn't important" in their lives (36%) or that their spiritual needs were not being met (36%).

Slightly more than one-quarter said they were unhappy about the way the church treated women (27%) or claimed the Catholic religion was out of date (27%).

Another 20% reported feeling called to a new faith, while 16% weren't satisfied with their congregations and 10% said they had moved to a new community.

Just 7% of former Catholics overall attributed their leaving the faith to marrying someone from another religious tradition.

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Age and political affiliation also correlate with religious retention, said Pew.

"Among adults ages 65 and older who were raised in a religion, 74% still identify with
that religion, while 11% identify with a different religion than the one they were raised in, and 13% do not identify with any religion," said the report. "On the other hand, among adults under 30, 55% still identify with their childhood religion, while 10% now identify with another religion, and 35% are not affiliated with any religion."

For U.S. adults raised in a religion, those who identify as Republican or Republican-leaning are more likely to retain their childhood faith (73%) compared to 56% of Democrats and Democrat-leaning counterparts.

In addition, Democrats raised in a religion are "more likely to be religious 'nones' today" compared to their Republican counterparts, said Pew.

Respondents who left their childhood religion gave varying reasons for either embracing a new religious identity or abandoning any religious identity altogether, said Pew.

Of the former, 48% who switched to another religion said they felt "called to a new faith," while 45% said their original religion did not meet their spiritual needs.

But 51% of those who are now "nones" — representing 29% of U.S. adults, and identifying as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" — "are most likely to cite having stopped believing in the religion’s teachings as an important reason for having left their childhood religion," said Pew.

Just over half (52%) of former Catholics who are now Protestant said their spiritual needs were not being met, with 49% reporting they felt called to a new faith.

In contrast, former Catholics who are now "nones" were much more likely to say they stopped believing in the church's teachings (52%), compared to 34% of once-Catholic Protestants.

Former Catholics who are now Protestant were less likely than their "none" counterparts to cite the following reasons for their move:

- Clergy and religious leader scandals (30% vs. 44%)
- Dissatisfaction with church teachings on social and political issues (26% vs. 42%)
- Religion's lack of personal importance (20% vs. 45%)
- A gradual drift away from the faith (24% vs. 41%)
- Unhappiness over the religion's treatment of women (17% vs. 33%)
- Feeling the religion was out of date (18% vs. 32%)

A greater share of Catholics who became Protestant (16%) than former Catholics who are nones (1%) said they had married someone with a different religion.

The majority (79%) of former Catholics who now identify as Protestant said belief in the religion's teachings was the key driver for their decision, followed closely by fulfillment of spiritual needs (76%), meaning in life (63%) and sense of community (56%).

Also cited were the religion's teachings on social and political issues (34%), familiarity (29%), sense of religious obligation (24%), traditions (24%), family religious affiliation (17%) and lifelong congregation affiliation (4%).

Among "nones" who had been raised Catholic — a group representing 7% of U.S. adults — the majority (81%) say they have chosen not to affiliate with a religion since they "believe they can be moral" without it, said Pew.

Other common reasons for maintaining their "none" status were questioning much of religion’s teachings (67%), holding they can be spiritual without religion (57%), disliking religious organizations (53%) and distrusting religious leaders (52%).

In addition, 47% reported not having a need for religion, 33% said they did not believe in God or a higher power, and 30% noted they had bad experiences with religious people, Pew said.

Pew's data showed that childhood experiences of religion, including attendance at services and religious practices in the home, have a demonstrable impact on adult religious identity.

In its May survey, which explored participants' childhood religious experiences, Pew found that most lifelong Catholics (73%) reported this to be largely positive.

However, "few former Catholics" said the same, although 56% of those who are now Protestant were more likely to do so than those who are now religiously unaffiliated (26%), said Pew.

"People raised Catholic who, as adults, are either Catholic or Protestant, are generally more likely to have had a religious upbringing than people raised Catholic who are now 'nones,'" said Pew. "For example, 84% of U.S. adults who were raised Catholic and still identify as Catholic say they grew up attending Mass at least once or twice a month, as did 77% of former Catholics who are now Protestant."

Fewer former Catholics who are now "nones" (68%) — although well over half — report having attended Mass weekly as children.

Pew also noted that "Protestant parents are more likely than Catholic parents to say their children attend religious services at least monthly (61% vs. 47%)."

Pew detected "a similar pattern with childhood religious activities" — five in particular: saying prayers at night, making religious arts and crafts, saying grace or praying before meals, listening to religious music, and reading religious stories.

"We find that among adults who were raised Catholic, those who are still Catholic or are
now Protestant are more likely to have regularly done more of these activities as children than those who are now religious 'nones,'" said Pew.

In this regard, more Protestants (38%) than Catholics (24%) report often talking with their children about religion, "and more Protestant parents than Catholic ones describe their households as extremely or very religious (35% vs. 20%)," said Pew.

Generally, said Pew, "many U.S. parents say their children regularly participate in various religious activities, such as saying prayers at night (46%), saying grace before meals (43%), reading religious stories (43%), listening to religious music (37%), or doing religious arts and crafts (28%).

"Overall, 27% of parents say their children take part in at least four of these activities," said the report.

Lack of religious activities in childhood, in contrast, appears to indicate that an individual will likely remain religiously unaffiliated.

"The transition from not having a religion as a child to identifying with one as an adult
is relatively rare," said Pew. "Overall, 3% of U.S. adults have made this switch."

Those who did so cited belief in the religion’s teachings (61%), fulfillment of spiritual needs (60%) and a sense of meaning in life (55%), said Pew.