The Decline of Institutional Religion & Implications for American Civil Life

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Let me just tell you quickly how the idea for this conference came about. We were hosting luncheons for journalists in Washington. We had four or five a year with prominent scholars, The Pew Foundation funded it for about 3 or 4 years, and I got back in touch with my contact at The Pew Foundation, the program officer, a man named Luis Lugo, who is presenting today. I said, “Luis, we would like to renew,” and he said, “Think bigger.” And I said, “Six lunches? Eight?” He said, “No.” And this is a quote I heard once from him and I have not heard from anyone else again: “Think as if money were not an object, what would you do?” I said, “Well, I’ll have to call you back.”

(Laughter.)

And then I said, “Let’s not do it here, let’s go to South Beach.” At that time it was Key West, now it is South Beach, and the idea was to help us focus on these issues in a setting that was away from the hubbub of New York and Washington.

So Luis Lugo and The Pew Foundation very generously funded this conference for 10 years, and we were having lunch a couple of months ago, and he was telling me about the data he is about to share with us, and I said, “Luis, it’s about time that you spoke here,” and he has agreed to do so, so we’re delighted.

Luis’s bio is in your packets. He has a Ph.D. in political science from University of Chicago, he is Director of The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in Washington, D.C. Before that, he was Director of Programming at The Pew Foundation in Philadelphia. And Luis has been the director of an incredible amount of important survey data and research data on how everybody across the religious spectrum votes, and he’s put that data together for us now.
And so, Luis, thank you, sir. You’ve now gone from being an observer to being a presenter.

**DR. LUIS LUGO:** I know. That’s great. It’s great to be back. Thank you. I do have to note, though, that punctuality seems to be slipping since we severed our partnership.

(*Laughter.*)

I keep telling my fellow Hispanics that one of the greatest contributions we can make to American society is to make sure that every meeting starts and ends on time. Yes, I usually get big laughs from them —

(*Laughter.*)

— but I have felt that burden ever since we replaced Germans as the single largest ethnic group in this country, but we’ll see if I get any takers. Where is Goldberg, by the way, I thought he was —

**MR. CROMARTIE:** He’s right here.

**DR. LUGO:** Well, why aren’t you over here? This presentation, much more than the previous one needs your levity and your good humor. And you’re an expert on everything. So you should just hire him to be the official responder to everything.

(*Laughter.*)

It is great to be back. I really miss the stimulating discussions at these conferences and the hobnobbing with the very interesting folks, journalists, and not incidentally, of course, being here in south Florida enjoying the nice weather. Anytime you ask a Cuban to come anywhere close to Miami, we jump at the chance.

(*Laughter.*)

It’s our capital-in-exile, as many of you know.

Now, The Pew Forum changed its business model, if you want to call it that, some years ago. As the name suggests, we were essentially a convening organization, and we made
the decision to transform ourselves into a research organization as part of The Pew Research Center, and so we had to trim some things so that we can do some things bigger and better on the research side, and this was the one program, I have to be very honest with you, that really pained me to go away from because I know how valuable it is.

After all of these sessions, I would get very nice notes from journalists who participated, and I’m just delighted, Mike, that through your entrepreneurial spirit you’ve been able to keep it going. Thank you to other funders who see the value of this. I hope you keep it going for many, many more years. It’s really quite a treasure in journalist education, so I think this is terrific. I’m glad to be part of it.

Thank you also for sandwiching me between two less, let’s say, heavy-duty data-intensive talks. You would probably have a revolution on your hands if you had started with this or ended with it. I’m not even sure a deep data dive like we’re attempting here this afternoon is compatible with Miami Beach. It’s just a certain incompatibility there, but then I reminded myself that I’ve always been perplexed at how a great number of orthodox Jews managed to co-exist with this very hedonistic place —

(Laughter.)

— so I figured, okay, if they can pull that off, maybe this will work after all.

We tell stories at The Pew Research Center with data. That’s what we do, so I affectionately call us “Data R’Us.” And not only do we do that, but I tend to do it with PowerPoint presentations, so it’s two downers right there: data-heavy and PowerPoint. I am obsessed now; I can’t talk without PowerPoint. It underscores the wisdom of Lord Acton: you know, power corrupts and PowerPoint corrupts absolutely. It definitely applies to me.

Now, I’m going to be going through a lot of figures here, but not nearly as many figures as you’ll be seeing up there. I’m going to be very selective with the data that I pull out to tell the basic story that I want to tell, and I would like for you to be equally selective with what you jot down for discussion purposes.
All the information we produce at The Pew Research Center is for the public interest, we don’t charge people, so any of you who want me to send you an electronic copy of the PowerPoint, I would be delighted to do it and to further discuss it with you, but let’s both be selective; if not, we will literally never get through.

So the basic task that Mike asked me to talk about, the topic to broach, was the decline of institutional religion, and I could have approached this in a variety of ways that show the loosening of institutional ties between the American public and their religious institutions. I could have started, for instance, with a topic which we have researched quite at depth, the whole phenomenon of religious switching and the increasing lack of brand identity, if you want to call it that, or brand loyalty. More than half of Americans have changed their religious affiliation at least once in their lifetime, and of those who have, the majority have changed more than once.

I recently gave a talk to seminary presidents. I talk to a lot of religious leaders and they just always find that quite astounding. How do we run our institutions when you’ve got that amount of churn? So we could have started there.

We could have also looked at quite a bit of research we’ve done on what a frequent participant — I don’t know when the last time he was here – David Brooks, called “flexidoxy.” Even members of the most conservative groups, it may surprise you, including evangelicals, who say that many religions lead to eternal life and there are many ways to interpret one’s religion. There is a kind of “flexidoxy” which serves to loosen people’s connection to their religious institutions.

I could also talk about the majority who place more weight on their religion adjusting to new circumstances, including adopting modern beliefs and practices, as opposed to preserving traditional beliefs and practices.

So the default position for Americans is change, and it manifests itself in a variety of ways. But I think the most powerful way in which I can illustrate this is by talking about the growing number of Americans who, when we ask them about their religious affiliation, choose basically “None of the above.” The growth of the “Nones” — N-O-N-E-S — as we
affectionately call it. It is really quite a remarkable thing, and I want to, in this time together, first to document the rise of the “Nones.”

Secondly, to look at the diversity within the growing number of the unaffiliated. The claim is made that these people are secular. Not all of them. In fact, the majority of them are not secular in terms of being atheists or agnostics; something else is going on here.

Thirdly, I want to discuss a little bit about the proximate causes behind this, and of that we’re pretty sure. We think we’ve got a good grasp on what’s driving up those numbers.

And then I would like to conclude by stepping back a little bit from our immediate data, and talking about root causes of this phenomenon. There I’ll talk about the research of others and the three major theories that are out there concerning this phenomenon. I would invite you, particularly with that section, to jump in. I know several of you cover religion and all of you are keen observers of the scene, so you no doubt have come to some conclusions on that as well. I’m always reminded, when I speak to non-researchers, of Bill Bennett’s famous saying about the social sciences: it’s “the elaborate demonstration of the obvious through methods that are obscure.”

(Laughter.)

And so, if we’re picking up something through our obscure methods, it must be pretty obvious out there, so I would really welcome your insights on this.

So let’s begin with documenting the trend [slide 1]. And here is the big picture going back to ’72, we could have gone before then. This is from the General Social Survey. In the last 40 years, in terms of religious affiliation or identification — I use those terms interchangeably — there are three big patterns that one observes in the American religious scene: the steady decline of Protestantism, the steady uptick in the number of the unaffiliated; and, I emphasize, the seeming stability of the Roman Catholic Church. Seeming stability. In the aggregate, it seems to be ending up as a percentage where it’s always been. In fact, I think you could argue — and we can talk about some of this — that the Roman Catholic Church has experienced the most profound change of any of these religious traditions, but yet in the aggregate it appears like it’s steady as a rock.
So basically in the 1950s, if you look at Gallup data, about 2 percent of Americans said that they were unaffiliated with any religion, and that held true until the late ’60s. There was an uptick in the early ’70s to 7 percent, and it stayed there for a couple of decades; then all of a sudden in the early ’90s we began to see the number increase. So it took 30 years for the percentage of the unaffiliated to go up 5 percentage points; it then took 10 years to go up the next 5 percent; and it’s taken 5 years to go up the next 5 percent. So it’s not only growing, but at this point seems to be growing at an accelerated pace.

In the aggregate, then, we see the growth of the unaffiliated and the declining share of Protestants. For the first time in our history, Protestants have become a minority in this country, 48 percent [slide 2]. So that’s where the main decline in an aggregate sense has been occurring. It is especially concentrated — and I’ll get into these numbers a bit more — but you can already see they are particularly concentrated among white Protestants. Black, Latino, and Asian Protestants have tended to hold their own in terms of percentage, but among white Protestants, both evangelical and mainline, there has been a decrease.

There has been a corresponding increase in the non-identifiers, the religious independents, the “Nones” [slide 3]. Again, 5 percentage points just in the last 5 years, from 15 to 20 percent. Notice I’m already beginning to break down this group a little bit to signal that not all these folks are secular. Less than 30 percent, in fact, are atheists and agnostics.

Let me put again a few more concrete figures here because I just want to say when you look at this chart [slide 4] — again, it’s a much busier chart; it’s the fuller picture — again you see a decline of 5 percent among Christians and heavily concentrated among Protestants.

BRIT HUME, Fox News: This is among a universe of people who are believers of some kind.

DR. LUGO: This is among all Americans.

MR. HUME: All Americans?
DR. LUGO: This is all Americans, with 100 percent of the population. So a 5-percent decline among Christians in the last 5, 6 years, and it’s coming in the aggregate from Protestants. And notice that it’s coming also from evangelical Protestants. I think that the perception is out there that this is all coming from mainline Protestants. That is not true. It has also come from evangelical Protestantism. Now, the decline in percentage terms has been less. I think if you do the figures there, a 10-percent decline among evangelicals, 17 percent among the mainliners, so it is more heavily concentrated among mainline Protestantism. But evangelical Protestantism is also feeling this. And, again, the rise of the unaffiliated and the growing number primarily through immigration of other faiths: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, et cetera.

Now, let’s talk about the demographics of what’s happening here, because this is very, very important. This is taking place across most demographic groups, among men and women — although notice that there is still a gap between the two [slide 5]. On every religious measure women are more religious than men, but the phenomenon of disaffiliation is also happening among women — and even across regions. The South, for instance, is not immune to this. There is a 3-percentage point growth among the unaffiliated. It’s happening there as well. Yes, the Northeast and particularly the Northwest are particularly unchurched, if you want to use that term, but it’s happening everywhere. It must be something about that Pacific air because if you look at statistics —

TERRY STOKESBARY, MJ Murdock Charitable Trust: Careful, careful, careful.

(Laughter.)

DR. LUGO: If you look at statistics, Canada, for instance — as I just recently did — British Columbia has by far the highest percentage of unaffiliated: it’s 40 percent in BC. It’s just out of sight, and all of the other Canadian provinces are much lower. So that Northwest, both in the U.S. and for Canada, seems to have the highest concentration of unaffiliated.

Now, there are two exceptions, and I already signaled one of them when I talked about Protestantism, when it comes to demographics. One is race. The increase among the unaffiliated has taken place primarily among whites, as you can see in this chart [slide 6].
Now, there is a reason there is a light shading for blacks here, and that means that it’s within the margin of error. So those of you who are statisticians, remember we always talk about the 95 percent confidence interval. If you want to relax that just a little bit, let’s say to 90 percent confidence interval, we would darken the number because it would be statistically significant, but not at the typical confidence level that we report on. And none among Hispanics, although again I think this bears watching.

Now, Elizabeth [Dias], before you ask me, because you often call me about data on Latinos, if you check your notes, I probably gave you a different number for the percentage of unaffiliated among Latinos. Here it’s at 16 percent, and, in fact, we think it’s 13 percent. The reason is that these are aggregated polls that are what we call modified bilingual, that is to say, interviewers call and if they identify Hispanics who can’t answer the questions in English, they will then get a Spanish interviewer to call back. That’s good, but not nearly as good as having a fully bilingual interviewer who can switch just like that. You get a lot more of the Hispanic community when you do a fully bilingual survey. It’s very expensive. We’re going to repeat soon the 2006 survey we did with our colleagues at The Pew Hispanic Center, as a matter of fact, a fully bilingual and a high end of about 5,000 people so that we can get not only Mexicans and Catholics (those groups you always get because there is a large percentage of the Latino population) but other nationality groups, like Puerto Ricans and Cubans and Dominicans and Salvadorans, as well as get non-Catholics, and break that down in a serious way. So I probably gave you 13; now you know why, right? This is fully bilingual; this is modified bilingual.

Every survey ought to be at least modified bilingual because if not, you’re not really reaching the Latino community in a way that you can count on your accuracy.

Now, as I told you, this is a very dynamic religious marketplace and over 50 percent of people change their religious affiliation at least once in their lifetime. Every religious group in this country is losing members. Every religious group is gaining members. The key is, what’s the net effect of that? So here is the recruitment side of religious switching, and what you see here is that the unaffiliated are growing massively through what I call “conversions,” in quotation marks [slide 7]. This is amazing. Seventy-four percent of all people who tell us they’re unaffiliated grew up in a religious tradition; very, very different
from among Protestants and Catholics, who have much lower levels of recruitment, although not insignificant.

Sometimes I’ve given this talk to Catholic leaders who say, “But look at the huge number who come in through RCIA every Easter.” Yes, that’s happened, and it’s reflected here: about 11 percent of Catholics were raised something else, but you have to then look at the other side, which is the retention, because it’s the net effect of the two that you have to consider.

And what I find interesting about this is that the unaffiliated are not immune from this competitive religious marketplace. It’s not as though people are unaffiliated and just never change. In fact, the retention rate for the unaffiliated is not particularly good [slide 8]. Protestantism manages to hold onto about 80 percent of people who were raised Protestant; Catholics are not as good, only 64 percent. That means that one-third of people who were raised Catholic are something else. But the unaffiliated, it’s 58 percent. So those people who were raised unaffiliated don’t necessarily stay there. 40 percent of these folks leave those ranks.

But, again, you have to put these two things together. And if you look at the Catholic numbers, for instance, for every four Catholics who have left through the back door, only one has come in through the front. That’s the picture I try to paint, that it’s not just the great number who are coming in through RCIA, but what’s happening to those who were raised Catholic? So it’s not a very good proportion.

This is a topic for another discussion, but you can tell already why I said that perhaps the change internally has been most profound in the Roman Catholic Church, and the reason is — we’re not going to get into this — but it’s immigration. Among immigrants to this country, Catholics outnumber Protestants by two to one, and then those Latino Catholic immigrants have the highest fertility rate of any group in this country, and so those folks have basically replaced those other three, which is why the proportion of Hispanics in the Roman Catholic Church is increasing. Fifty percent of all Catholics under 40 in this country are Latino. They have made up for that difference, so it seems stable, but, in fact, the Roman Catholic Church has undergone profound change.
By the way, there is even a good number — about 9 percent, of the population whom I affectionately call “reverts,” you know, they start out in one tradition, wander around, try a couple of others, even pass through an unaffiliated phase, and then come back to where they started. So nothing is ever completely settled. The dust never quite settles when it comes to religious changes in this country.

Now, I’m going to get to your question, Mike, about sorting out these folks.

Secondly, I want to talk a little bit about some of the internal differences within the ranks of the unaffiliated, and to do that, I have to put on the table one key question we ask, it’s the salience question, as social scientists say, the importance question: “How important is religion in your life?” And we use that measure to begin to sort out the unaffiliated [slide 9].

Now, among the general public, about 60 percent tell us that religion is very important in their lives — this is the whole U.S. population of adults — and another 22 percent say it’s somewhat important. So about 80 percent of Americans tell us religion is at least somewhat important in their lives. It’s 33 percent among the unaffiliated. Over 40 percent among those who tell us they are nothing in particular. So there are three ways, aside from a volunteered response, that in our surveys people can get into this category of the unaffiliated: they can tell us that they’re an atheist or an agnostic or nothing in particular, or they can just volunteer the option, “Look, I’m nothing,” before we even get to the end.

So we use this measure, then, to break down these folks between atheists and agnostics for whom — remember, for some of these folks religion is at least somewhat important, not many, but particularly among agnostics. We use this measure to break down the unaffiliated into three buckets [slide 10]. Let’s call the first one hardcore seculars, for lack of a better term, atheists and agnostics — about 30 percent of this group. Now, that’s 6 percent of the U.S. population, if I can translate it into larger demographic group, so that’s not insignificant. But there’s an equal number among the unaffiliated who are what we call the religious unaffiliated; that is, people who said they are nothing in particular but who tell us religion is at least somewhat important in their lives. That’s about an equal, in fact, an equal number, as with the atheists and agnostics, so another 6 percent of the U.S.
population. So far from being hardcore seculars, you have, in fact, a high percentage of these folks who have a very vital religious pulse, if I can put it in those terms.

Then you’ve got what I call the religiously indifferent, they’re not agin’ it, they’re not for it, they’re just sort of riding through; they don’t have strong views on this one way or the other.

And in case you’re wondering whether this works, it really does carry over into other measures of religiosity, whether they identify themselves as a religious person [slide 11]. About 50 percent of the religious unaffiliated say, “Yeah, I’m a religious person.” Sixty-four percent of these people say, “I believe in God with absolute certainty.” About fifty percent say they pray daily or more. So this is not an irreligious segment here. In fact, some of these measures — I didn’t want to overburden you — but some of these measures stack up very well against the least connected of those who say they are affiliated. This is a pretty religious group, the 6 percent of the U.S. population who are unaffiliated but are significantly religious.

By the way, we’ve broken this down for political implications. One of the things that always perplexed me when I came to work with The Pew Research Center is the number of seculars — that’s what we used to call this category, by the way — who said they wanted a president with strong religious beliefs. What’s that about?

(Laughter.)

Well, when you break it down into the various groups among the unaffiliated, you begin to see that there are some significant differences within that group. But going forward, I’m just going to collapse what I’m calling the religious unaffiliated and the religiously indifferent, that 71 percent. If not, it would get too unwieldy. Even when we collapse it, though, I think you see why differences in a variety of measures between the “NiPs,” as we call them internally — the “Nothing-in-Particulars” — and atheism/agnostics. To be sure, they’re not as believing as affiliated Americans [slide 12], not surprisingly, but two-thirds of the unaffiliated believe in God or a universal spirit, and over 80 percent of the “Nothing-in-Particulars.” So this is a pretty theistic crowd, these “Nothing-in-Particulars.”
I’ll go through these quickly. I just want to hammer home the point, if you look at frequency of prayer [slide 13], very similar category: 90 percent for the U.S. public, who pray regularly; only 40 percent among the unaffiliated, but it’s still 40 percent, and it’s 50 percent plus among the “Nothing-in-Particulars.” So it’s a consistent pattern until you get to frequency of worship attendance [slide 14].

Next to race, by the way, when we do these regression analyses — again the methods that are obscure — after a presidential election, and next to race, church attendance is the most reliable predictor of how people voted. Even in elections in which religion doesn’t seem to matter, we run the regression analysis, and here it comes again. This is very interesting. Again, it gets at the underlying dynamic here that we want to probe in more detail. When it comes to attendance at religious worship, the “Nothing-in-Particulars,” in fact, more closely resemble atheists and agnostics, with very low levels of attendance. Again, about 48 percent of affiliated Americans tell us they attend church, synagogue, et cetera, weekly. It’s only 5 percent among the unaffiliated and in single digits among the “Nothing-in-Particulars.” In this measure, by the way, the gap would be even greater were it not for the low percentage of white mainliners who tell us they attend at least weekly (only about a quarter) but it’s still a significant difference, and here the unaffiliated, the vast majority of them tell us they seldom or never attend. So whatever religious life they have, it is not a life that they have in community, in connection with religious institutions; it is a sort of customized, individualized form of spirituality. Again, we’ll talk more about that.

And I always get the questions, “well, yes, that’s true in terms of some traditional measures, but alternative spiritualties (New Age, Eastern religions) are sky high among the unaffiliated.” I often hear that. Well, yes, it is there, but what I found very interesting, if you look at these other spiritual beliefs — like spiritual energy and yoga as a spiritual practice, reincarnation, astrology, the evil eye — yes, it’s there, but at precisely the same level as we find it among the affiliated [slide 15]. So that person sitting next to you in mass or at church, the same percentage as the unaffiliated are into these beliefs and into these practices — being in touch with someone who has died, consulting psychics, been in the presence of a ghost, the only difference is on religious or mystical experiences [slide 16]. It’s much lower among the unaffiliated. But, again, on these alternative spiritualties, yes,
it’s there among the unaffiliated, but at no greater rate than among affiliated Americans. So I’m not sure that that really provides much of a clue.

We do know that the unaffiliated do reflect on the meaning of life, not nearly to the extent as affiliated Americans, but still there, at 53 percent [slide 17]. That’s significant.

So all of this helps shed light on this whole issue — again, something I’m always asked about — of the spiritual but not religious. How many Americans are spiritual but not religious in the way they define themselves? Well, here you have the definitive answer: 20 percent [slide 18]. About 15 percent of those who are affiliated (so 15 percent of the 80 percent) and almost 4 out of 10 among the unaffiliated describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. When you add those two together, that’s 20 percent of the U.S. population who say they are spiritual but not religious.

AMY SULLIVAN, National Journal: So, Luis.

DR. LUGO: Yes.

MS. SULLIVAN: Just to clarify.

DR. LUGO: Yes.

MS. SULLIVAN: So that’s a self-identification question? What was the wording of it?

DR. LUGO: Well, some others have asked, “Are you spiritual but not religious?” We ask those questions separately, so one would be, “Do you consider yourself a religious person?” and another would be, “Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?” As often happens with these things, it’s better to do the analysis when you ask the questions separately; if not, people say, “What do you mean?” and it’s very hard to figure out. So we have a pretty high degree of confidence here.

MS. SULLIVAN: So you’re not adding in some of the religious beliefs and practices and creating a measure of —

DR. LUGO: Correct. This is strictly on the basis of self-identification.
MS. SULLIVAN: Thanks.

DR. LUGO: So this is a big group. Most of you are logged on. If you go to SBNR.com, there is a lively website, and that stands for “spiritual but not religious.” Their tagline, by the way, is “Love is the answer. You are the question.” That’s the tagline for SBNR.org. Check it out. It’s quite interesting.

So, I think this phenomenon of sort of individualized religiosity, if you want to call it that, may also help account for the explosion in the number of spiritual directors. I started picking up on this some time ago, and then I think it was Lisa Wangsness, of The Boston Globe, who did a very nice piece on the growth of spiritual directors. Now, there are traditions like Catholicism and Anglicanism that have always had this, but this is a different kind, driven by Millennials basically. She checked out with Spiritual Directors International — there is such a group; it’s the single largest group of these folks here — and it turns out that these spiritual directors have grown in number from 400 in 1990 to over 6,000 today, and it makes a lot of sense. This is customized spirituality without the pressure of having to belong to a group. Right? And just like you have a life coach and personal trainers, then you’ve got the spiritual director, who can customize the package for your individual needs. So the rise of this sort of personal autonomy in religion is sort of the flip side of the decline of institutional authority. If you think about it, those are very closely connected.

So there is a lot of religion among these folks, but it’s not of an institutional nature. In fact, we ask the unaffiliated people specifically, “Are you looking for a religion to call home?” and 9 out of 10 of them say, “No, we’re not. We’re not looking for a religion” [slide 19]. I’ve heard this from many people, that these are seekers who are looking for an institutional connection. We don’t find it. There is a percentage of them that do, but most of these folks are perfectly happy with their customized, individualized brand of religiosity.

Now, what’s driving this change? Well, as I said, we can be very, very certain on two major factors that are driving the change, the proximate causes, if you want to call them that. We have direct evidence for this. And one of them is generational change, unquestionably. If you take a snapshot of the U.S. public today and divide them by age
cohorts, this is the picture you get [slide 20]. Now, Millennials, 32 percent, 1 out of 3, are unaffiliated with any religious institution.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Can you define Millennials?

**DR. LUGO:** Millennials, I’ve got it defined there, 18 through 29. The Gen X’ers are actually the 30 to 49, the next level down; then the Boomers, that’s the 50 to 64; and then we collapse, the Silent Generation and the Greatest Generation into one. Notice the step-up in disaffiliation with each one of those generations.

The rise of the unaffiliated does have political implications, but it has much broader social implications than just political.

So I know what many of you are thinking, “Well, but isn’t this simply a life-cycle change issue?” That is to say, sure, Millennials *today* look like they’re more disaffiliated, but over time they will join up. Well, here is the picture that emerges when we take a look at that life-cycle effect on affiliation [slide 21]. The answer is, there is no life-cycle effect. Generations tend to end up pretty much where they begin. It’s happened with, again, the Greatest, the Silent, the Boomers, and the Gen X’ers. So at least based on what we know, there is no reason to suspect that it’s going to increase rapidly among the Millennials.

Let me just make one point before I move on from this one. So, if each generation pretty much ends up where it started and each subsequent cohort is starting out less affiliated, as the more recent cohorts displace the older cohorts, the overall levels of affiliation are dropping. Demography is destiny on this variable.

Now, that’s not to say — and here is where people’s instincts are correct — that people don’t become more religious as they age. They certainly do. Look at the importance of religion, for example [slide 22]. There also is a life-cycle effect for other measures of religiosity, though please note again that each successive cohort is starting out at a lower level than the previous cohort.

So there is a 10-percent point rise among the Greatest and the Silent, and an especially pronounced uptick among the Boomers — 20 percent. That’s significant. In fact, Frank Newport, the head of the Gallup organization, has just come out with a book, *God is Alive*
and Well: The Future of Religion in America, and he thinks that we’re on the cusp of a religious renaissance in this country, and he really bases that on the Boomers and what we’re seeing among Boomers. He believes they will become even more religious as they age, and by their sheer numbers, they will shift the country into a more religious mode. Some of his arguments, by the way, are quite interesting. Boomers obsess with their well-being, and he points to the studies that have shown the link between levels of religious commitment and better mental and physical health, and the Boomers being who they are and looking for well-being, they’re going to gravitate towards religion. He even thinks that businesses and even government will catch on to this and find ways to incentivize people to worship and to be part of a religious community.

MR. CROMARTIE: Doesn’t this contradict everything you’ve just told us?

DR. LUGO: Well, I’m not sure. If it’s affiliation, it certainly does; but if it’s the importance of religion or even something like daily prayer, you could see it going up [slide 23]. The problem is that with all of these charts — and this is the problem for his thesis — is that unless the Boomers really become a lot more religious than the previous generations during their lifespan, they’re still going to end up lower than where previous generations were. So it’s the cumulative impact on the population; it’s just not going to be what he predicts. But he thinks that Boomers, given their great demographic weight and how they become more religious — though they may not become more affiliated — but in his view, they will become a lot more religious.

There is even a life-cycle effect on attendance at religious services [slide 24]. So people do tend to attend a little more — this is not as pronounced — they do tend to attend a little more as they age. They don’t affiliate any more as they age, but they do attend a little more, and here you see it, of course, with the Greatest — maybe that’s the mortality factor that kicks in, a 12 percentage point rise, at the end of life. So I think generational displacement is clearly a driving factor here. Of that we’re quite certain.

The second factor, we’re also quite confident about, but it’s a little more difficult to grasp, is what we call the growing social acceptability of not being religiously affiliated. And, no, I don’t think people necessarily lie to us; I think religious identity — actually, not unlike party identity in politics — is not something that’s fixed; it changes, even in a short period
of time, how people define themselves. But what you clearly see here [slide 25] is that the ranks of the unaffiliated are being fed by the “Chreasters,” as we call them, those who go to church only on Christmas and Easter, the “C&Es,” those who have a very, very tangential relationship to their faith community. From 38 to 49 percent, in that category, now claim to be unaffiliated. Notice it’s pretty stable among those who attend weekly or more, as well as those who attend monthly.

So what you’re seeing here, and you’ll see it in a couple more charts, is a sort of hollowing of the middle. We’ve done studies at The Pew Research Center on political polarization. There is a certain kind of religious polarization going on, that the folks in the middle are tending to drop out altogether rather than retaining a religious identity, while the folks who are the most religious in fact aren’t budging. This is not Europe, where that’s tanking. That’s holding steady. But it’s the folks in the middle who seem to be dropping out into one of the extremes, if you want to call it that.

This is a very difficult thing to get at — when they leave a religion, why do they do it? And I’m just continually impressed with the fact that many of them simply drift off [slide 26]. Yes, they will also point to certain concrete things that bother them and so forth, but it’s this sense of drift that I find most interesting — people just drift, drift, drift, and eventually say, “You know what? It’s no use calling myself Catholic or Protestant anymore. I’m nothing, so when you give me that option, I’m ‘Nothing-in-Particular.’”

I have to throw this chart in for Bob Putnam [slide 27]. He spoke in here on the findings of his book *American Grace* with David Campbell. Putnam actually repeated the same interview, I think it was like 12 months later, with the same group of people. It was sort of a mini panel study, you interview them at Point A, and then you interview the same people, I think it was about a year later, and they found that, in fact, about 10 percent of those people who used to say they’re affiliated and now say they’re unaffiliated, and vice versa. So they call them the “Liminals.” Well, he actually calls them the “Unstable Nones,” but I don’t want to use that term.

*(Laughter.)*
Let’s stick with liminal, “threshold” in Latin. These are people who can’t decide whether they’re in or out. And, of course, you say, well, something changed in their life. Well, they did the research: no other religious measure changed. They were identical in every other respect except in what they called themselves in that period. So it’s fascinating.

So, look, whether Americans are becoming more religious or not, everyone agrees that they are drifting away from organized religion, that their ties with it have frayed. They still believe, many of them, but they are, to quote Grace Davie, who also presented here several years ago, a sociologist from the U.K., if they are believing, they’re “believing without belonging.” That’s the best way to describe this growing group: believing without belonging.

So let’s talk a little bit about root causes. And, again, I don’t think these are mutually exclusive, all of this could be at play. But one theory that Putnam has popularized is that the rise of the unaffiliated reflects a political backlash against the religious right, that given the strong nexus between the GOP and evangelicals, that Millennials especially have expressed their distaste for that kind of arrangement by saying they prefer no religion at all. So it’s a backlash against that. Actually, a couple of UC Berkeley sociologists wrote the first piece on this, Hout and Fischer. And to be very fair, Hout and Fischer say this is a conjecture. Putnam’s says it is highly suggestive in his book; in his public commentary, he’s a bit bolder on that.

So what’s the evidence for this, that it’s this mixture of religion and politics in the Christian right that’s driving many of these folks to say, “Look, religion is tainted. I just don’t want to be associated with any of it.” Well, timing is one of them. They rely heavily on the issue of timing. And, indeed, if you look at the timing and the growth of the religious unaffiliated, it corresponds with the heyday of the religious right.

But the second point they make is look at the profile of the unaffiliated, look at their political profile. This suggests that they’re actually opting out of religion because of that unit, of that nexus between evangelicals and the GOP. Well, I’m going to mention a couple of things that may provide some indirect evidence for this. But whether it’s a good or bad theory, it provides an opening to talk about the political profile of the unaffiliated, which
I know many of you folks would find inherently interesting. So here it is in a very short order, and then, Mike, maybe we can come back to some of the others.

So what do we see here very clearly [slide 28]? This is in the context of the last election cycle. About twice as many Americans, as a whole, describe themselves as conservative as describe themselves as liberal. Among the unaffiliated, it’s precisely the reverse: twice as many consider themselves liberal as consider themselves conservative. So there is a huge gap between the affiliated and the unaffiliated despite the fact that some affiliated groups have a very low incidence of people who classify as conservatives, specifically African Americans, as you can see there.

On social and political issues, there is just no question: they are much more liberal on social issues like abortion and same-sex marriage [slide 29]. Again, you can see the 25-point difference between the unaffiliated and the affiliated on the question of abortion, over 30 points on the question of gay marriage. In fact, Putnam’s more specific thesis is that it’s the Christian right’s focus on gay issues that has turned off a lot of Millennials and prompted them to become unaffiliated.

Interestingly, by the way, when you ask the broader ideology question on “bigger government, more services; smaller government, fewer services,” the unaffiliated track with the general population; they’re not nearly as liberal on that score as with the social issues.

Of course, party follows ideology increasingly, and is part of the political polarization. And as you can see here [slide 30], among all registered voters — again this is in the January-July period during the election — 5 points in favor of the Democrats. Among the unaffiliated, 37 points. Heavily liberal, heavily Democratic. About 70 percent of these folks voted for Barack Obama in the last election. So there are huge gaps between the affiliated, among whom, incidentally, is a 3-point margin for the Republicans, despite the number that really sticks out at you down there among African Americans, black Protestants — 80 percentage points for the Democrats. And I don’t have it here, it’s a different poll, but among Latino Catholics, it’s 50 percentage points in favor of the Democrats. So even despite that, there is a significant gap between the affiliated and unaffiliated.
In fact, this is a fascinating development: the unaffiliated have become the single largest religious bloc, if you want to use that term, within the Democratic Party. They now account for about a quarter of the Democratic constituencies [slide 31]. Notice who’s second: African Americans. So the Democratic Party has both the most secular religious group and the most religious group in this country, African Americans, by every measure. The least and the most, which is really quite fascinating. Maybe some of the controversy — I know a lot of it focused on the status of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, but there was also this fairly significant debate about God in that one reference, the “God-given potential” in the Democratic platform, which also caused quite a bit of friction. Might this indicate on the question of religion some friction going forward within the Democratic Party? I don’t know. You can ask Antonio Villaraigosa, the Mayor of Los Angeles, who had to confront that reality head on in the Democratic convention, the three votes. People were not at all convinced that two-thirds voted to bring this back in.

So the unaffiliated are both more liberal, more Democratic. They are also much more negative, or let’s put it this way, not as positive on religion, the affiliated folks [slide 32]. So if you look at views on churches and religious organizations, yes, about 70 percent of these folks tell us that churches are just too involved in politics, but that’s not much different from those saying that churches focus too much on rules and they’re too concerned with money and power, et cetera, so not explicitly political reasons. Interestingly, they do acknowledge the positive role of religious institutions, about bringing people together to strengthen community bonds. That’s interesting given their aversion to being part of groups, but they see that and that they play an important role in helping the poor and the needy, less so on the morality in society.

When you look at views on religion and politics, it’s quite clear that there is an aversion here [slide 33]. I think I’ve already alluded to this, presidents with strong religious beliefs. Huge difference. Among the affiliated, 75 percent want a president with strong religious beliefs. Among the unaffiliated, it’s only 32 percent. Among the religious unaffiliated, by the way, to reintroduce that category, it is 63 percent. That’s the group that we pick up along with the seculars.
On the question of churches keeping out of political matters, this last one is very interesting. Notice the gap there is very small, “Churches should not endorse candidates.” This is the one question where we consistently find the most consensus among American religious groups, from the most religious to the most secular. It’s as though these folks, the vast majority of Americans, welcome religion’s role in politics, including when politicians bring it into play, but when it edges onto the question of institutional autonomy, as it were, they really draw back from too close an identification of religious institutions with politics. So the majority welcome religion in public life, but they draw back on sort of shortening the institutional distance between church and state.

I think we can talk about some of the other things later. I think delayed secularization is a second theory. The third one I do want to get to at some point because I do think that it may be the case that what we’re seeing in religious disaffiliation has in fact little to do with religion as such. That religious institutions may be implicated in a much broader narrative in American society, which is impacting institutions across the board, and religious institutions are simply getting caught up in that. So this is why some of the religious leaders breathe a little sigh of relief because they drew the immediate conclusion that it might not be anything that we’re doing in particular, although they acknowledge there is a lot they can do to improve, but that there are stiff headwinds out there that are taking along all institutions with it.

Now, from political parties to bowling leagues, and that’s the power of Putnam’s metaphor of *Bowling Alone*. I have the chart there where you see the bowling leagues just tanking. Even though the number of people bowling is rising, bowling leagues are disappearing. So it may be a much bigger thing going on here which I want to make a strong pitch based on the demographic evidence that we probably should be paying a lot more attention to marriage as one of those institutions, that, along with its lessening, we’re no longer wedded to the idea of marriage, as it were; it’s really taking along a lot of other institutions with it.
MR. CROMARTIE: Luis, could I just ask you quickly something you mentioned some months ago, which is this has huge implications for institutional religion as it recommends involvement in politics.

DR. LUGO: As it recommends?

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes. In other words, you had said to me that the Catholic bishops all in unison said, “We need to vote this way,” and yet the laity didn’t.

DR. LUGO: Are you sure you’re quoting me on that?

MR. CROMARTIE: I do remember. It’s why I asked you to speak.

(Laughter.)

DR. LUGO: The Catholic bishops made some clear signals. I don’t remember them telling anybody —

MR. CROMARTIE: No, no, not how to vote, but they made clear signals, and I think you were just saying the point that the data shows that even when they make clear signals, this problem with institutional affiliation, it creates a problem in them having any authority to sort of push there.

DR. LUGO: Well, no, I think that’s right. I think religious authority writ large is being eroded across the religious spectrum, and I think there are several measures that point to that.

MR. CROMARTIE: Okay. Rebecca, you’re first.

REBECCA SINDERBRAND, CNN: So I want to say first of all I really appreciated the breakdown of the unaffiliated. The same thing happens when we cover independent voters; every 4 years people lump them all together as one big group. It’s a shorthand, people have lots of different leanings and so on.

I wanted to ask you two questions, one of which may be completely unanswerable, both of them may be completely unanswerable — so I’m going to ask them anyway.
So the first thing is, any Jewish American can tell you Christmas is a lot more than a religious holiday in this country. Obviously, it’s something that ties people together, it ties families together, it ties the culture together. You’re almost celebrating it whether you want to or not. And then on a related note, as you saw, it’s important for a president to have strong religious beliefs, all these people who say they’re more likely to vote for a Muslim candidate than an atheist candidate. So what I was wondering was, how many of these unaffiliated people, people who say they have some religious leanings, feel like either there is still some huge stigma to calling yourself agnostic, even though that’s effectively what they are, or by saying it, they’re separating themselves from the larger culture, taking themselves out of the mainstream, and when they say, “I want a president who has strong beliefs,” what they’re actually saying is, “I want a president who is part of the mainstream culture in this country.”

**DR. LUGO:** Yes, it’s excellent. Well, I mean, we don’t know what percentage of these “Marginals,” if you want to call them, still continue to identify with a religion. My sense is there are certain thresholds on these things, and once it gets to a certain percentage, people may just say let it all rip, and you’ll have these unaffiliated coming out of the woodwork. It’s been increasing pretty steadily. But it’s a fascinating question, you’re absolutely right. There is a large number of Americans who cannot imagine voting for an atheist.

A religious unaffiliated is a different proposition, and the question is, why is that? I actually think there is an intervening question we ask that may help to shed some light on that, and the question is, is it necessary to believe in God in order to be moral? Which gets at the link between religion and morality. And not surprisingly, for the vast majority of religious people, for whom their morality does come out of their religious convictions, can’t imagine how you can reach some moral ground without starting off with religion. We find this, by the way, among Muslim groups who visit us all the time. We brief these groups on a regular basis on our research. You have to be very careful the way you use the word “secular” because for many of these Muslim leaders — these are primarily the folks who come — secular means immoral — right? — because no God, no morality. That link is very quick. And so I think that’s maybe what’s going on here. If you ask the typical European that question, the balance is going to be, no, you don’t have to believe in God
to be moral. Americans are precisely in the other direction. You still have a significant majority who say, yes, you do have to believe in God to be moral.

So I think that maybe what’s at play here, that for religious people it’s hard — if you want a president who not only is about interests and power plays but who has some moral compass, for many religious people that means you need to send us a signal that you take religion seriously.

**MS. SANDERBRAND:** I just had a follow-up, semi-related in the sense of tying it to politics. When we looked at the chart, and you see that spike after 1992, and obviously the shorthand is that was the height of the family values, culture wars, and so on. My question is, the generation that started coming of age then was the first that was born completely after the big cultural shift in the late ’60s. So how much of that might have occurred regardless of whether there was a culture war? Again this is unanswerable, possibly, but —

**DR. LUGO:** No, but that’s an excellent point, and it gets to the Putnam thesis: how much of this phenomenon of disaffiliation would have occurred had there been no Christian right? That’s the counterfactual you have to work through. And I have to say that when I look at the broader dynamics that are going on in society, my hunch would be that we would probably be seeing the same thing. That’s not to say that when we do this polling — and I didn’t get into some of this (and we’ve given them closed-ended questions, we’ve given them open-ended questions), we just don’t find the direct evidence of people telling us, “Yes, I checked out of religion because religion had become too politicized or had become too conservative.” We just don’t see a big number in the direct evidence. I grant Putnam and Hout and Fischer that the coincidence of the two is very suspicious, and then when you look at the political profile of the unaffiliated, it is a group that has serious issues with the Christian right, but whether one has led to the other, again, we just don’t find the direct evidence. When I looked at the evidence, I think there is broader societal forces at work, which we can get into.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Okay. Eleanor.
ELEANOR BARKHORN, The Atlantic: One of the things I was wondering about was what you were saying about the life-cycle change and how it’s unlikely that the Millennial Generation will become more religious as it ages. And I guess my question on that was, how does that make sense along with some of the data you were showing us earlier about switching and people who are growing up in unaffiliated contexts and becoming more affiliated?

DR. LUGO: Well, that’s a great point. If the unaffiliated constitute an ever-increasing percentage, won’t that mean that you have more children of the unaffiliated? Well, there are a couple things. One, to say in passing that the unaffiliated Americans have the lowest fertility rate of any group. There is a strong connection in this country and abroad between level of religiosity and fertility rates. So they’re going to have fewer of them, even though there may be a lot of unaffiliated folks, a lot fewer children.

But, again, Eleanor, the key is the net effect. Even if you have more children among the unaffiliated and more of them become affiliated, the drift from the ranks of the affiliated, at least up until now, this is making up for all those losses, it’s not even close.

For Catholics, I said for every four who left, one entered through the front door. For the unaffiliated, it’s almost precisely the reverse: for every one who leaves, 3.25 or something like that, not quite 3 1/2, are coming in through the front door. So as long as you keep up those ratios, you’re going to have to lose a lot of kids into the ranks of the affiliated to begin to make a difference.

MR. CROMARTIE: Michael, you’re up next.

MICHAEL GERSON, The Washington Post: Luis, let me ask you to step back historically just a little bit. One of the theories that came out of the enlightenment is the secularization hypothesis, the idea that modernity inherently involves the decline of institutional religion. That didn’t seem very credible in the 20th century with the rise of evangelicals and Pentecostalism, Islam, fundamentalists, Hinduism, a lot of other things. But a lot of religious people fear that we’re seeing the revenge of the secularization hypothesis in this type of data, that we all end up like Vermont, and then Vermont ends up like Sweden —
(Laughter.)

— and that’s where America is headed. And that seems heightened by the generational aspect of what you’re talking about.

DR. LUGO: Yes.

MR. GERSON: So how does that relate to the broader question, the tie between just modernity and the decline of institutional religion?

DR. LUGO: Yes, in fact, I’ll show you a chart here to underscore what you’re talking about [slide 35]. This is an analysis we did of countries throughout the world, and we have a religion scale that contains the importance of religion and prayer and two or three other variables, and then GNP per capita. There is a strong connection between rising levels of material well-being and lower levels of religiosity, including disaffiliation, by the way. So the thing that strikes you about this is what an outlier the U.S. is, that were it to conform to the general pattern, it would be below Western Europe in terms of religiosity, whereas, in fact, it fits comfortably with Latin America. So how do you account for that? And that’s not just Latino immigrants, by the way. I know, we’re taking over the place —

(Laughter.)

— but I don’t think you can just — well, Latin America has come here. It’s a little more complicated than that, but that’s what you’re alluding to, that in fact what we may be seeing is delayed secularization, that what all of these European sociologists — Weber and all the rest — when they looked at Europe writ large, they were right, but the timing was off in terms of the United States; that’s the thesis.

By the way, Americans sense what you just said [slide 36]. I was going to point out here that two-thirds of Americans think that religion is losing influence, so they’re resonating with the secularization theory even though they don’t get into the specifics of that stuff. And notice that the affiliated as well as the unaffiliated think that. You have to go back to the early ’70s after the cultural revolution in this country to find a higher percentage of Americans who said religion is losing influence. So clearly Americans believe that.
You do see, Mike, some movement on some measures: in the last 10 years there has been an 8-percent drop in the percentage of people who believe in God with absolute certainty [slide 37]. You do see a little uptick in the percentage of Americans who seldom or never attend [slide 38]. Now, these are not major, but they’re significant.

But look at the importance of religion in people’s lives [slide 39]. It’s remained pretty constant among those who say it’s very important. What you see, though, at the same time — I should have given you another line here showing the percentage of people who say it is not very important or not at all important. That number has ticked up, but those folks have come not from the ranks of this 60 percent — that would be decreasing — it’s coming from the middle once again. All right, so those folks, the “Liminals,” that can’t decide whether they’re in or out, to the extent that they’re opting, they’re opting for unaffiliation. So that creates the impression that the country is becoming more secular. In fact, what it’s becoming is more polarized, religiously speaking. There is very little evidence that among that significant percentage of Americans for whom religion is very important and who attend regularly, that number doesn’t seem to be budging. So it’s not like Quebec where you have literally an implosion; there is just no evidence of that here. The evidence we do see is that the folks in the middle do tend, to the extent they’re gravitating, it’s not towards becoming more religious, but becoming less, or at least identifying themselves as less religious. I’ve got several other things to say on that score, but that in essence is the response to the secularization theory. Some measures are moving slightly downward, but the folks who are at the top in terms of religiosity, that figure does not seem to be budging [slide 40].

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Paul Farhi.

**PAUL FARHI, The Washington Post:** Luis, this is a really interesting set of data that tells us about the bread box and the size and the shape of it. And my question is, what do you do about the bread box? What is the answer or solution? What do you tell the bishops, what do you tell the pastors, about their problem and the solution to their problem?

**DR. LUGO:** Nothing. I don’t say anything about the solution to the problems because that would put me in a different mode, in an advocacy mode; we have a very strict non-
advocacy position at The Pew Research Center. You will never find a set of recommendations at the end of our reports.

Your question is an excellent one, Paul, but you missed it by a few hours, because that’s the gentleman [points to Dr. Keller] that you ought to be addressing that to. Redeemer Presbyterian, what are church leaders doing to respond to this? I’m in the good position to say, “You’ve got a problem and God bless you,” as I leave out the door.

(Laughter.)

MR. CROMARTIE: Tim, do you want to jump in here on this at all? Feel free to break in.

TIMOTHY KELLER, Redeemer Presbyterian Church: I’ll just say, I believe Luis’s idea that all institutions have got a problem with expressive individualism; it’s acidic, yes. In New York City, people are involved with the Philharmonic, for example. It’s almost impossible to get people to come and stay for all four movements. The idea used to be that when you came to a symphony, you were part of a community, and you were listening to it as a community, but that concept is gone. People will come for the movements they want, and they’ll leave, and, of course, it’s driving the traditionalists kind of crazy, but, all the way down to that level, it’s a problem across the board. And I can get into more about how you respond as a religious institution to that. You can’t ignore it or just give into it. That’s all.

DR. LUGO: Yes. Newport’s thesis is that, yes, because of the Boomers, we will become more religious, but it will be differently religious, that is to say that the forms of communal life will need to be very different than they are today. Again, it’s a tall order because these folks, as I’ll conclude with that chart [slide 51], they don’t place a high value of being part of a moral community, they just don’t. It’s for religious institutions and everything else.

So I think one of the challenges will be, from the supply side of things — there is an interesting discussion here. I hate to reduce it to economics, but there is a supply side and the demand side of the argument here, and on the demand side are people like Rodney Stark and Roger Finke and others who say that on the supply side that religious institutions adapt, and this is an entrepreneurial culture. They will come up with the kinds
of institutional arrangements that will draw these people back in. Then there is the supply side, and historians tend to be supply side — they wouldn’t call themselves that — but it’s, “Look, we’ve had series of revivals in American history, what’s not to say that there won’t be another major revival and that people will gravitate back?” Newport is sort of like that, the demand will be so great from the Boomers and others that religious institutions in the U.S., in their entrepreneurial way, which they’ve always been because they haven’t had government support — you sink or swim here — in their own way they will respond to that challenge.

MR. CROMARTIE: Paul Edwards.

PAUL EDWARDS, Deseret News: You’ve answered my first question, so I’ll ask my second —

DR. LUGO: Okay.

MR. EDWARDS: — which is Mary Eberstadt is coming out with a book next month about God and the decline of God in western tradition, and she traces it very much to decline in family and family structure. And I’m just wondering if you have any data here or anything that you could point to that says something about family structure within the unaffiliated.

DR. LUGO: I’m glad you asked. Remember I said there were two demographic factors that buck the trend. Remember? Across economic groups, across educational groups, across regions of the country, the phenomenon is growing. The two that I singled out, one was race, we’ve already talked about that, it’s heavily concentrated among whites [slide 41]. The other one is fascinating. I thought this was one of the most interesting results of our survey, which didn’t get as much play, is the uptick among the not married. All of the increase, when you look at the marriage factor, all of the increase among the unaffiliated took place among those who are not married. No change at all among married Americans on affiliation. I’m increasingly convinced and really taken — and this goes from politics to everything else — that the two most important demographic changes happening in this society, one is the ethnic change, unquestionably, it’s huge, and we Latinos have a lot to do with that, but also Asian. Let’s not forget, 5 percent of all Americans are Asian, the vast majority are immigrants, they’re sort of forgotten in this discussion but vitally important.
But the second one is marriage, absolutely critical in a variety of ways. Look at the marital status of religious groups [slide 42]. And this is what I’m talking about, that there may be something larger at play, and religious institutions are getting part of the blowback, but they’re not primarily responsible for — although I’m sure you’ll ask your pastor, “What can you do about marriage rates and counseling and so forth?” But it’s very clear here. Look at the huge gap, despite the fact that the most religious group in the country, black Protestants, are very, very low here, very, very low — although 60 percent of African American adults, are not in a married relationship. It’s really quite remarkable: even despite that, look at the huge discrepancy. Religion is closely connected — this is your point — with family structure, no question about it. Married people are much more likely as people who are not married to attend services weekly. It goes across the board.

And you say, well, what does this presage? It gives me an idea to wrap up what I was going to say. Look at the falling marriage rates [slide 43]. Talking about a profound demographic change, marriage rates have fallen by 20 points in the last several decades. Unwed childbearing is fast becoming the new norm. More than 50 percent of babies born to women under 30 are born outside of wedlock. It’s a huge demographic change, with strong implications, of course, also for material well-being, if you’ve been keeping up with that literature.

Look at the median age of first marriage [slide 44]. Millennials keep postponing, they keep going to grad school, keep postponing it. You extend schooling, you postpone these things. So a general aversion to marriage may signal, given how central that institution has been, a general aversion to lasting commitment of any kind, including to religious institutions.

Even in politics, yes, there was a gender gap in the vote in the last election. What struck me as I poured through the exit polls was the marriage gap, the marriage and the ethnic gap, between the two. Romney won among married women, and among white married women it was no contest. So is it a gender gap or a marriage gap? I think those things need a lot more examination.

MR. CROMARTIE: Amy Sullivan.
MS. SULLIVAN: I first had a quick comment on Rebecca’s initial question about conflating religion and morality. There is certainly a theory, and it’s one I embraced in my book for the overall argument that —

MR. CROMARTIE: What’s the name of that book again, Amy?

MS. SULLIVAN: Thank you, Michael.

(Laughter.)

It’s The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats are Closing the God Gap.

And the argument is politicians’ morality, and particularly a president’s morality, was not something that voters particularly cared about for most of American political history until around the period of Watergate, when obviously it became an issue with Nixon. And it was just kind of historical chance that Jimmy Carter was the next Democrat to run and was also the most overtly religious presidential candidate that we had had, and as a result, we conflated religious identity and a sense of the moral compass of candidates. We’ve never really moved on to find another measure for that. So that may be some of what people are getting at with the question of whether they want the president to be a religious person.

But for my question for you, Luis, I wanted to repeat Paul Farhi’s question in maybe a way that you are allowed to answer, which is I know you have some data on the switchers.

DR. LUGO: Right.

MS. SULLIVAN: And I wondered if you could get into some of the reasons why people switch out of the unaffiliated group and tell you that they have joined a new tradition.

DR. LUGO: Yes. Well, first of all, remember most of those folks were raised affiliated. Those who convert from affiliated to unaffiliated, yes, some of those folks come back, but the vast majority of them do not. Remember these folks, there is a significant percentage who are still quite spiritual, and it’s primarily from those folks who tend to come back. If you look at the responses, a lot of that has to do with the search for spiritual community
actually, interestingly, which even if they don’t value it for themselves, you saw that chart that I showed you, even the unaffiliated say, “Yeah, we think religious institutions are important for community,” and so they’re conflicted about that [slide 32]. They personally don’t feel a great need to go there, but they understand the importance of it, if I’m reading our numbers right. And so I think those are the kinds of things that these folks will point to. At some point in their lives they need something a little bit more structured than the do-it-yourself religiosity.

**MS. SULLIVAN:** And is there a distinction between community being kind of just a community of people and providing a place for their children to go, or are we talking broader community like churches can help improve the common good?

**DR. LUGO:** Yes, that’s a good point. I think, as I recall, most of them had to do with the former, a more sort of immediate sense. Remember, these folks are still highly skeptical of religious institutions’ involvement in public life, but they do see the importance of religious institutions for community more broadly, if that makes sense. So I think it’s probably the former rather than the latter in terms of sort of joining up with religious institutions, rather than for major policy changes, and so we’re not picking up —

**MS. SULLIVAN:** No, but I’m thinking like feeding the poor and —

**DR. LUGO:** Yes, well, they acknowledge that as well — in fact, that kind of role was the second thing greatly valued, even among the unaffiliated.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Before we get back to the list, though, if I could call on Dr. Keller. Tim, it would be good to hear from a practitioner quickly here. You’re in the heart of Manhattan, and you’ve got a thriving and growing church. How many switchers do you have in your church? Or do you know? And what is your quick take on these numbers yourself personally?

**DR. KELLER:** Well, I am very happy with myself because I try to study The Pew numbers all the time. When those things come out, I read them very, very carefully. I could remember most of them, so I said, okay, all right, you’ve been keeping up. Absolutely the main features and trends and the ideas, they resonate with what I see on the ground. The
only thing maybe Michael wants me to share because I said something to him, as a practitioner, you can’t help it when you’re taking surveys, you have to try to make it as scientific as possible, so if you call up a Southern Baptist, a person from Arkansas, 54 percent evangelical, everybody goes to church, and Southern Baptists use all the evangelical language — you’re born again, you’re everything. But I personally, as a practitioner, I would see that person who is raised in a Southern Baptist church, tons and tons of them are not quite sure what they think about things, they’re not particularly devout, they certainly would identify themselves an evangelical, but I wouldn’t see them a whole lot different than — I was raised Lutheran. Most mainline Lutherans, are in that middle ground. Most of them are not over in the devout area really. I would say that most Southern Baptists are there. My experience as a spiritual director and talking to people is that a person raised in any church where the kids just say, “I’ve got to go and I’ve got to come,” especially if it’s a kind of place in town where everybody goes, they don’t think it out and make it their own. They don’t really appropriate it personally. I would think that most really devout, conservative Protestants or Catholics, people have really thought it out and said, “This is what I believe and it’s a matter of principle,” and yet I see that an awful lot of those folks are in the evangelical — I’m just trying to say I feel like the numbers are basically right, but sometimes they seem soft to me in that I’m sure that I can imagine you calling somebody up saying, “Where do you identify yourself?” and they say, “Sure, evangelical,” because it’s the tradition.

I was raised Lutheran and became a Christian in college in the 1960s reading John Stott’s books and C.S. Lewis’s books, and when I came up with the idea that I’m born again, I had to think it out, it was an alien concept to me. I had to decide I was born again, and that’s a very different way to come to evangelical convictions than being raised in a Southern Baptist church. So I look at those things and I wonder.

DR. LUGO: Yes. I can make a point on that, and Tim’s is an excellent point. And we actually reach that evangelical Protestant number, just to stick with that designation, in two different ways. One is hugely expensive, we do it every so often. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey back in ’07 did it this way; that is, we ask people their denominational family. And then we back-code them. We don’t just ask them, “Are you born again?” we ask them, “Are you Southern Baptist?” so if they tell us they’re Baptist, then we take them
through a whole battery, and then subsequently – this is heavy-duty — we assign them the denomination. If the denomination is evangelical, more broadly, we put them there. When you do that, you’re absolutely right, you are going to have a percentage of those Protestants who belong to evangelical churches who tell us they are not born again.

DR. KELLER: Right.

DR. LUGO: So that’s the heavy-duty way. And by the way, a fairly significant percentage, not a majority, but a significant — I think it was like 25 percent or so — of those who belong to mainline Protestant churches who say they are born again.

DR. KELLER: What percentage?

DR. LUGO: Let me check, but I think it was 25 or so.

DR. KELLER: That would fit with my intuition, yes.

DR. LUGO: Yes. But, again, these are surveys with 35,000 interviews; it takes us months and millions of dollars — it’s very, very expensive. So I’ll share with you the shortcut way in which a lot of people do it, and that is you ask people, “Are you Protestant?” Of course, that’s not enough anymore because you have to probe a little deeper to put them into that category. But then you ask them a separate question, “Are you born again or evangelical?” You then use that question to assign people to the evangelical category as opposed to the mainline category. It’s a shortcut which statistically happens to work because the born again evangelicals who belong to mainline Protestant churches actually cancel out the non-born again people who belong to evangelical churches, and so it washes out. But that’s the shortcut that every pollster has to make.

So what I’m telling you is, by definition, in many of these charts and political polling when you see how evangelicals are trending, those are Protestants who describe themselves as born again or evangelical.

But you’re absolutely right, the reality is much more complex. But we can’t send in the Marines, we have to send in a land army to really get at that information.
MR. CROMARTIE: Okay. Doyle, you’re up.

DOYLE McMANUS, Los Angeles Times: I want to go back to the question of causality that several questions have gone to before, but to make sure I understand what your thinking is on it — and I hope this isn’t just a case of every question has been asked, but not everyone has asked it.

(Laughter.)

As you noted, Putnam and Campbell, in American Grace, hypothesized that maybe it’s a backlash against the Christian right, but I remember reading some earlier sociology that talked about a whole broad-scale disengagement from institutions of civic engagement in America by a guy named Bob Putnam, and it was Bowling Alone, and you’ve been kind enough to illustrate my question here with a slide. To what extent is it possible — and Dr. Keller, I think, alluded to this a little bit — that the rise of the “Nones” is just a subset of that much larger trend, that churches are just like bowling leagues or symphony orchestras? What is your own working hypothesis?

DR. LUGO: Yes. Well, I think, as I put together all of the accumulated data, that I find the Putnam of Bowling Alone — here is the key chart from that [slide 47]. These are men and women’s leagues and how they spiked in the first part of the century and then have been on a tailspin ever since. I find that the most compelling, much more compelling than the latter Putnam on the argument of backlash to politics, and I find it so for two reasons. One I mentioned: we just don’t find that much direct evidence when we ask people why you’re leaving, that that’s what’s driving them away. For some, but not for the vast — it’s a rounding error, maybe 1 percent or something, whereas I just see a lot of other things happening in the broader culture that seem to underscore that very powerful argument in Bowling Alone. This is the metaphor, but you can look at political parties: both Democrats and Republicans have dropped 10 percentage points in the last several decades, and independents have grown by 20 percent [slide 45]. The marriage rate, I think, is just a very, very good one. You look at trust in institutions, they’re all going down [slide 48]. The exception was the uptick for the military because it had gone down so far after Vietnam, but all branches of government, including the Supreme Court. You’ve got corporations, you’ve got labor unions, Boy Scouts, everything is going down.
I look at that evidence and I’m saying, man, oh, man. Religious affiliation is one of those areas of affiliation where it’s also happening. Now, I tell you, Putnam finds that particularly alarming because — here is confidence in organized religion, by the way [slide 49]. You can see a fairly steep drop [slide 50]. A study by a colleague of mine at The Pew Internet Project — Lee Rainie — clearly shows that people who are active religiously are much more active across other institutions as well, that this is sort of all of one piece. In fact, I calculated this. Among those who are religiously active, who attend, affiliate, with religious institutions, they tend to belong to 5.61 other groups. Of those who aren’t active in church groups, it’s 2.11, so a significant difference. And Putnam, he has stated this, he thinks faith communities — in fact, I’m quoting him — are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America. So to the extent that that’s declining, it may be part of a broader trend, but it’s accelerating that trend, if his insight here is right.

Speaking of Lee Rainie, by the way, he has also written a lot on how technology-enabled change is taking us increasingly away from tight groups into looser networks. I don’t have time to discuss it and I don’t have the expertise for it, but I think new forms of technology are part of this broader phenomenon.

MR. CROMARTIE: Before I go to Sally, quickly on this point, Carl, on follow-up to Doyle?

CARL CANNON, RealClearPolitics.com: Yes. It’s follow-up and it’s also following what Luis just said. I read that book a long time ago, the bowling book. It came out like 13 years ago. And I thought — and correct me if I’m wrong — that one of the basic reasons people aren’t bowling in leagues is they’re watching television. Television was a big factor in keeping people at home and not going — and it got me wondering, well, if people watch Joel Osteen on their TV, where do they count? You see his church is packed, but you know there are a lot more people watching on TV than —

DR. LUGO: Well, I was so impressed with Lee’s analysis just on the role of technology and institutions more broadly that I said, “Lee, you know what? We ought to do a survey together to see how new technologies are impacting people’s religious connections, where they get their information, et cetera,” so we’re going to do that one soon, Carl. So you’re ahead of me.
SALLY QUINN, The Washington Post: Yes. I want to get back to Europe. My friend Karen Armstrong always tells me that — she lives in London — when she gets invited to a dinner party, the hostess will say rather hesitantly, “But you must promise not to discuss God.” And so what is curious to me is, why has Europe become so secular, and not just one country, but all of Europe? And when we’re on the same educational level or intellectual or economic level, we are more religious. Why is it that Europe has become so secular and why haven’t we become — and are we going the way of Europe? And if we are, why?

DR. LUGO: Yes. Again, excellent questions. Actually, Peter Berger, the great sociologist, who has spoken here I think on two occasions, he is an immigrant from Austria, is an eminent sociologist of religion who actually changed his mind. He was tutored at the feet of European scholars, and the more he looked at the evidence, the more he said, “Well, maybe we need to revise that,” so he started speaking about the “desecularization”. Yes. And Peter makes the point that for many Europeans, the U.S. is what needs to be explained. He actually takes the contrarian view that it’s European secularity that needs to be explained because that’s the exception. If you look at it from a broader global perspective, I often set up our good friends from Europe when they visit, I show them these measures for the U.S. and then for European countries, and they say, “Yes, you’re right, this confirms what we thought, you all are a bunch of religious fanatics.” And then I broaden it and include countries from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the United States and Europe, and I say, “Who needs to be explained now?” because what’s clear is that Europe really stands out for its high levels of secularism in contrast to the rest of the world. This is not unrelated to some of the debates about immigration in Europe, by the way. These are all highly secular societies and here are Muslims and Christians — about half of the immigrants in Europe are Christian, not Muslim, coming in. But it’s a double whammy. It’s both Muslims coming in and many of them are highly practicing Muslims, which offends European sensibilities on at least two counts, so it complicates the picture tremendously. Why have we avoided that? I really do think —

MS. QUINN: Well, and are we avoiding it?
DR. LUGO: Well, at least we have avoided it up until now. And I think some reasons have already been suggested. We’ve never had an established religion at the national level, which means in essence that you have to survive on your own, there are no government subsidies here to keep you going. So we really did establish, with the First Amendment, a free market in religion — as free a market probably as we’ve got. There are many other things. I think subsequent waves of migrants have also tended to renew spirituality in this country in various ways. I think the role that historically faith-based organizations have played in integrating migrants, providing social services — it’s a sector that has always been much more vibrant than it has been in Europe, which tends to take a more statist orientation.

But then there is the other issue for many in Europe. Religious institutions were connected with the ancien regime, with the old order, whereas in the United States, there has always been a strong connection of religion and progressive causes, not just as more recently with conservative causes, but with progressive causes, which gives a very different flavor to that. It’s not unlike Poland and places like that where the church was identified with the resistance movement to communism. It’s a very different proposition when the church has aligned itself on that side.

I see this in Latin America, my own native Cuba. Cuba became independent quite late, almost 100 years after the rest of Latin America, and the Roman Catholic Church there was very much in league with the Spanish colonial authorities. In fact, many of the priests were Spaniards, and so it didn’t take the Castro regime much effort, frankly, to decapitate it. Whereas I remember being asked at one of my talks at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, when the whole Central American thing emerged, whether Nicaragua was about to become another Cuba, and I said, I don’t think so. I really don’t, and that’s quite apart from any ideological proclivity of the Ortega brothers. They may be quite in line with the Castro brothers on this, but the church in Nicaragua, from my visits there, it was just very clear to me that if I had to pick the most important person in Nicaragua, it was Miguel Obando y Bravo, the bishop. And so I said there is no way they’re going to be able to decapitate the church there, and I think just on the side, parenthetically, I think that may help to account why the Ortega brothers then began to discover liberation theology, and it’s not a frontal attack but a different kind of approach to the question.
So might we be might catching up, I don’t know. Again, it’s very early. I’m with Casey Stengel, I don’t make predictions, especially about the future. I thought that was wise advice on his part, but we’ll have to see, Sally. We’re going to stay around to document it, though, however way it goes.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** We’ll do this again in a couple years and see where we are. John Siniff.

**JOHN SINIFF, USA Today:** Okay. Luis, one of the things that stood out was the talk of the proliferation of the spirituality directors. And I thought if this whole journalism thing doesn’t work out, I may have a job after all.

(Laughter.)

But it really brought me to the same place where Carl ended up, and maybe it’s an unanswerable question, but it is that the search for community in 2013 is very different than the search for community in 1980 and certainly as late as 1990 and beyond. And I know you mentioned that there is going to be a study that is going to look at that, but might the acceleration of the “Nones” be attributable directly to the acceleration of technology and social media and the fact that atheists and agnostics now have a place to go, and just at the tip of the keyboard you can find that community without leaving your home?

**DR. LUGO:** No, again, if I read the research done by my colleagues at The Pew Internet Project, it’s akin to the first Putnam, of *Bowling Alone*, that they see this phenomenon, how technology-driven forces are breaking apart communities or institutions and creating networks. They are sort of quasi-communities, but obviously the price of entry and exit is a lot lower in these online communities, people just opt in and out all the time. So I’m not even sure we can call them communities, perhaps online networks. I have a strong hunch that that is part of what’s going on, but, again, we’re going to go deeper into that. That’s not to say, by the way, that people who do have a strong religious commitment to religious community may not also have a heavy presence online to supplement that communal experience. So, again, we just don’t have data on that stuff, so we’ll have to dig it up.
MR. CROMARTIE: David Bornstein?

DAVID BORNSTEIN, The New York Times: Yes. I had two questions. One of them was, the slide that you showed before that started with Africa on the top left all the way down to Europe and the U.S. as an outlier? It reminded me of a slide that I saw in a book called The Spirit Level that looked at income inequality and how the United States was similarly — actually, the graph looked very similar. I’m wondering if there is a crossover of this analysis with looking at income inequality and how it affects people’s overall attitudes to institutions, and particularly religious institutions.

DR. LUGO: Yes, that’s a great question.

MR. CROMARTIE: You said you had two?

MR. BORNSTEIN: Yes. And the other question is, I grew up in Quebec, and I saw the implosion of religion in Quebec, and I’m wondering, is there a flip side? What’s the other side of the story, the city, or the state, or whatever, where you’ve seen the opposite of what has happened in Quebec? Is there a place in the U.S. where you’ve seen —

DR. LUGO: Well, I mean, if you want a continent-wide conversion like that, it’s Africa in the 20th century.

MR. BORNSTEIN: But in the U.S.?

DR. LUGO: No, in the U.S., no. I think when people talk about the greater presence, there actually is a very important distinction. Greater presence of religion in public life, that doesn’t necessarily signal a growth in religiosity. What it could signal is simply the people who are religious have become more attached to their religious identity and insist that that be given public expression. This is in fact what’s been happening since the late ’70s.

I was telling somebody, I was at graduate school in my Ph.D. work at the University of Chicago in the late ’70s, studying international relations, and I was being fed on textbooks that had the European secularization theory and a variety of Marxist alternatives to it. They disagreed on many things. The one thing they did agree on was that religion would become increasingly privatized and irrelevant. And I’m picking up the front page of The
New York Times, and I’m reading about the revolution — actually in Pakistan before Iran — Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, and I said, “What’s going on here?” It was sort of a top-down Islamic — and then Islamists. And then there is one in Iran. But at the same time, it’s the rise of the religious right in this country in the late ’70s, it’s Likud in Israel, it’s the BJP in India, it’s this new pope who comes on the scene, John Paul II and his connection with Solidarity and trying to articulate a Catholic basis for democracy in Latin America. And I’m looking at this saying, there’s a disconnect here between what I’m reading in the textbook and what I’m reading on the front page of — so that really caused me to rethink the paradigms, as we call them in the academy, that I was being fed on because I think the reality was so different.

So please distinguish, I think, between the public emergence of religion on the one hand and then whether religiosity is growing or not. I think that’s a much tougher proposition. There is some evidence, particularly among Muslim groups, immigrant groups, that younger Muslims tend to be somewhat more religious than older; they’re bucking the trend, as it were.

We found that in places like Russia in a big survey of Islam that we’re going to release soon. So you do see some of that, but I think primarily what you’ve seen in the last few decades is the public presence of religiosity on the scene, and I think the previous speakers pointed to why that might be, sort of the exhaustion of the old ideologies whether it was pan-Arabism or old secular ideologies.

There is a lot of insecurity, from economic dislocation to global warming. There is a lot of secular apocalypticism going on out there, too. And cultural, I mean, I think focusing on the question of gender, and so it’s very much in line because that’s what seems to be changing the fastest, and it’s very unsettling to a lot of people around the world. We tend to welcome it in the West. A lot of people don’t. And I think a lot of those things have sort of driven people to rediscover the public role of their religious identity, and for Islamists it is particularly easy because Islam is inherently public. This western enlightenment notion of here is the public realm and here is the private, and religion belongs in the private, that’s like coming from a different universe for most Muslims who understand the Islamic tradition.
MR. CROMARTIE: That was the answer to his second question. What was the first one again, David?

MR. BORNSTEIN: If there is a relationship to income inequality or general social inequality in that curve that you —

DR. LUGO: Yes, well, the big picture would suggest that, but if you looked at that chart that I showed in terms of demographics, it’s happening across demographic groups in the U.S. in terms of income. It’s happened among high income, middle income, and low income Americans.

MR. BORNSTEIN: That’s actually different because reference anxiety can be within the same income group, it’s not something that —

DR. LUGO: Well, that’s true, yes. No, I think that’s worth looking at much more carefully — the link with economic dislocation. And actually all of these things, from marriage rates to you name it, I think that’s a critical factor that we have to consider when we look at broader social changes, I think undoubtedly that’s the case.

Now, Putnam is also optimistic on *Bowling Alone* and other writings that, look, we were at a similar juncture at the end of the 19th century in the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society, than we are now from an industrial to a post-industrial or information society, and American institutions driven by faith-based institutions adapted to that and created a plethora of institutions to meet that particular challenge. He’s optimistic that this can happen again, that religious institutions and others will take up the challenge, given this new economic dislocation, of confronting that. So he’s very hopeful.

MR. CROMARTIE: And you are?

DR. LUGO: I don’t take a position — either hopeful or unhopeful.

(Laughter.)

I’m not even for interreligious understanding, Mike, you understand that.
Because that’s to take a position on things. We don’t take a position on things.


DR. LUGO: That’s right.

MR. CROMARTIE: You only deal with facts; we draw the implications.

DR. LUGO: Yes.

MS. QUINN: I have another question. I want to go back to the slide that you showed about no difference between those who are “Nones” and those who are religious on how they think about the occult. How they think about the occult, astrology and psychic phenomenon and the evil eye and all of that. I’m wearing my evil eye bracelet right now — and several other trinkets, but I have found this, too, that so many of my friends who are really religious have their charts read all the time, they read, they wear trinkets and religious objects, and they do yoga and they go to psychics and all that, and people who are atheists do the same thing. And so I was just interested that you even included that in your survey.

DR. LUGO: Well, it’s interesting how these things —

(Laughter.)

— how they segue into each other. As we were beefing up our global polling, I knew that as we got into Sub-Saharan Africa where we did a major survey on religion, Latin America is next, even in the Muslim world, a big survey that’s about to come out —

MS. QUINN: Well, the astrology particularly.

DR. LUGO: Well, that’s right, and also the evil eye —

MS. QUINN: And Hindus, yes.
DR. LUGO: Yes. So I increasingly said we’re going to find a lot of this kind of stuff going on — what scholars call syncretism, blending of traditions — and I said, we ought to get a fix on whether that’s happening in the U.S. because people are always going to say, well, look at these people, how strange they are, and we ourselves were surprised actually the degree to which, not just the unaffiliated, but affiliated Americans were finding ways of mixing and matching elements of very different religious traditions. Again, we backed our way into it, but it’s become a topic of great interest to folks.

MR. CROMARTIE: Okay. Well, ladies and gentlemen, join me in thanking Luis.

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