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Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 2 February 2019



America's Changing Religious Landscape

Podcast with **Robert P. Jones** (18 February 2019).

Interviewed by **Benjamin P. Marcus**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

Benjamin P. Marcus (BM): *My guest today is [Robert P. Jones](#) the founding CEO of [PRRI](#) (Public Religion Research Institute) and a leading scholar and commentator on religion, culture and politics. He's the author of [The End of White Christian America](#), two other [books](#), and numerous peer reviewed book chapters and articles. Dr Jones serves as the co-chair of the national steering committee for the Religion and Politics section at the [American Academy of Religion](#). He's a past-member of the editorial boards for the [Journal](#) of the American Academy of Religion, and [Politics and Religion](#), the journal of the [American Political Science Association](#). He holds a Ph.D. in Religion from Edinburgh University, an M.Div. from South-Western Baptist Theological Seminary, and B.S. in Computing Science and Mathematics from Mississippi College. Today we'll be discussing PRRI's 2018 reports about what's happening with the religious landscape in the United States. We'll look at the demographic changes in the country that might help explain the political climate that we find ourselves in today. Hello, Dr Jones – and welcome to the Religious Studies Project! I'd like to begin by asking a really broad question: what's happening with religion in the US today?*

Robert P. Jones (RJ): Well, it's a great question. A lot is happening. And I think that is the story – that we've been experiencing a great deal of religious change, really since the 1990's, but it's been accelerated in the last decade. So just to give you a couple of, I think, relevant stats: one is the percentage of white Christians in the country has been declining, fairly precipitously, in the last ten years. And in particular we've gone – in the US – from being a majority white Christian nation, to one that is no longer a majority white Christian nation. And it's happened fairly rapidly. If you go back to just 2008, the country was fifty-four percent white and Christian. And when I wrote my book, *The End of White Christian America*, I was working on 2014 data. And that number had dropped from fifty-four percent to forty-five, and that was a significant drop. But we've been continuing to track data since 2014 and that number's down to forty-one percent, now. So we've looked at a thirteen

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percentage-point drop just since 2008 – so over the last decade, in the percentage of white Christians in the country. That's come with an uptick in the religiously unaffiliated category. So if you just go back to the 1990s those numbers are in single digits: five, six percent in the 1990s. Our last data, 2017 data, is showing twenty-five percent of the public. And among young people it's forty percent of the public. So this is a real sea-change in the country. Going from mostly a white Protestant country in 1993. That was actually the last year the country was white and Protestant. But even if you take all white Christians together – Protestant, Catholics, Orthodox, Non-denominational and denominational together – that number today is only forty-one percent. And that's a real shift for the country.

BM: *Wow. I have a number of questions from that. One is this category of “Nones” – n-o-n-e-s – people who are unaffiliated. Many people think that that’s a pretty homogeneous category of atheists and agnostics. But from what I understand that's not the case. Is that right?*

RJ: That's right. Atheists and agnostics actually only make up only a minority of that category of a quarter of the US population. And the rest of them are kind of a mixed bag. When we've looked underneath the hood, there's kind of two other groups in there. There's one group that looks . . . that we've just broadly labelled “secular” in some of our reporting, that looks broadly like a cross-section of the country. But there's another group in there that we've actually dubbed “unattached believers”. And that group looks, on many measures of religiosity – like, “How often do you pray?”, “How often do you attend religious services?”, “Do you believe in God?”, those kind of questions – they look like religious Americans, even though they refuse the category and won't identify with any particular religious group. That group tends to be less white, more African American or Latino. And they tend to be younger. And so it's a very interesting group. I think, as a whole, this group has moved so fast now that it is a very diverse group. I mean, after all, it's a quarter of Americans, so that is a big, big group that we're talking about, now.

BM: *Wow. And does that seem to be concentrated in the sort-of Godless coasts? Or is that happening across the United States? Are we seeing a decrease in white Christian presence – not only in the middle of the country, but also in the coasts? Or is it happening in certain places?*

RJ: Yeah. This is a great question. This is definitely not a bi-coastal urban phenomenon. One project that the PRRI started back in 2013 is called the [American Values Atlas](#). And we actually have this online – for any of your Listeners who want to go check it out – it's ava.prii.org. And what we did is, we started realising that we had enough data every year that, if we were careful about combining it, we could actually map the religious demography of every state in the country, and also the top thirty metro areas in the country (**5:00**). So you can go online right now and you can compare Iowa to

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California, for example. And you can go back in time as well. And one of the things that you see there is, if you go back ten years to today, virtually everywhere is experiencing these changes. So it's not just New York and California, or Texas, but it's Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota – each of these states has experienced, for example, approximately a ten percentage-point drop in the number of white Christians in their population over this last decade.

BM: *Wow. Are there any states or cities that jump out at you as sort-of a surprising religious demography? Or maybe the majority religious community is not what you'd expect? Or the second biggest community is not what you'd expect?*

RP: Well we still see some history at play. We still see Rhode Island as one of the most Catholic states in the country, for example. And we still see the South heavily evangelical. So you can see the You can see the religious history still there. But we are . . . it is starting to mix up. Even though you can see these historic, I guess, centres. But you can also see the shifts happening there, as well. So even in Rhode Island you're getting an uptick in the religiously unaffiliated, and more Protestants than you had in the past. And in the evangelical South you're getting more Latino Protestants and Latino Catholics as a result of immigration, and changing migration patterns in the South.

BM: *A few times, already, you've mentioned the history of the United States; you've mentioned, not only religious communities, but also mentioning markers of race and ethnicity, patterns of immigration. Can you tell me more about the relationship between religion, race or ethnicity and the United States, and how that shows up in the data?*

RJ: Well it's . . . when I was working on the last book, race . . . it became just so clear. I mean, it's something that I've known, but it became clear to me in a more poignant way, that For example: if you asked me in a sentence to summarise religious voting patterns, you can't really talk about that without talking about race. So the short answer to that question is, in presidential elections, white Christians tend to favour Republican presidential candidates and non-white religious people – Christians or other religions and the religiously unaffiliated – tend to support Democratic candidates. So the kind-of lines of race – even class, to some extent – but the most dominant fault line in the religious landscape is really around white, non-Hispanic Christians and pretty much everyone else. You can see this cleavage on a whole range of issues.

MP: *That's so interesting. I had a professor in graduate school who used to say that you could accurately predict America's voting patterns if you knew "four Rs": race, region, religion and rank. And that's something that I've thought about a lot. This relationship between these four Rs and how*

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people vote. And the embeddedness of religion in American culture. Are there religious communities that are more diverse in rank or race, than others?

RJ: There are, but they tend to be the smaller ones. So, like, one of the more diverse groups in the country is Jehovah's Witnesses, for example. They tend to be very racially and ethnically diverse – much more so than most other groups I can think of. But they, of course, are a very, very small group in the country. But it is a story of American religion that race has sorted and bifurcated religious communities to such an extent that you really can see these major cleavages, both in the denominational structure on the ground – in the way that they're lived out and organised – but also in the macro-data. One of the reasons why, for example, social scientists – when we're kind-of parsing data – tend to look at African American Protestants in one bucket and white evangelical Protestants in another bucket, is because, despite the fact that they share so many religious beliefs and practices – even hymns – when you look at how they behave, and their attitudes, and the political space, their race kind-of acts like a prism that just pushes them in completely different directions. So it's hard to overstate, I think, the way that race has structured American religiosity.

BM: *That's so fascinating, and brings me to another question, which is: as you know, Religious Studies as a field has had a lot of trouble with the – quote-unquote – "world religions paradigm". And the fact that we often sort people into religious communities based on these large groups: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus . . . And often when people teach about religion in schools, or in the media, we expect people to act in certain ways, or believe in certain ways, based on the group that they fall in (10:00). Is the research that you're conducting showing that it's more complicated than that? Or are there other ways that we should start thinking about religious identities, so that we're not talking about these large world religions, but subsets, based on race, or ethnicity, or gender, or any other categories?*

RJ: Yeah. Well, here I think we've got the push and the pull of the quantitative versus the qualitative study of religion. You know in the social sciences you need these categories. You need categories to sort people into, and they need to be big enough categories that you can actually conduct reliable statistical analysis on them, right? And so, if you're doing a survey of a thousand people, you need these categories to be big enough to at least have, say at least 100 or so people in them. Otherwise your results start getting fairly unreliable, if you drop below that. On the other hand, you know, we all should just acknowledge that these are all sort-of human categories that have been constructed by social scientists to help us see things in different ways. They're never perfect and they always do some kind of violence, actually, to the kind-of messy reality on the ground. We should always acknowledge

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that. On the other hand, you know, if we allowed for the uniqueness of every single congregation on the ground – which as everyone who's ever served in a congregation knows that, like, if you move from one Southern Baptist congregation to another, it's a really different world, even though they're in the same denomination - if we stuck with that kind of granularity, which is really valuable, it would be really hard to come up and say anything broad about the group. So I think it is a real challenge. To me what matters is: can you test the category against lived reality? Right? And, is the category . . . I think it's never the right question to say, for example, “Is the category of ‘white evangelical Protestant’, right?” – which has race, ethnicity, and kind-of religious identity all baked into one thing. It's never the right question, I think, to say, “Is that a truthful category?” Or “Is it a right category?” I think the question, honestly is, “Is it a useful category for helping us understand the lived reality on the ground?” That means it should never be sacrosanct, it should be questionable. And we should be willing to look at, for example: what do all evangelicals look like, if we don't just look at it by race? And then, how does that category help us see something interesting on the ground?

BM: *Right. I want to pause a moment on this topic: white evangelical Protestants. We began by talking about the religious demography of the United States. I mentioned that we might be able to see something about our political landscape because of the religious landscape. What do we know about the political landscape and the influence of white evangelical Protestants? Are we putting too much emphasis on white evangelical Protestants to understand our current political moment, or are there other groups we should be looking at? What are your thoughts on that?*

RJ: Well, it's interesting. White evangelical Protestants, like other white Christians, have been declining in their percentage of the population. So, for example, if we go back again to the beginning of Barack Obama's tenure as president, his election, what we see is that white evangelicals – depending on the survey you look at – were around twenty-three, twenty-two percent of the population. And our last data has them down now to fifteen percent of the population. So they, like other white Christians, have been declining as a proportion of the population. But what makes them important, even as they decline, is that they have been so active on just one side of the partisan divide in the US. So unlike mainline Protestants or Catholics – who tend to be more divided in their partisan allegiances – even as this group has shrunk, they have still maintained their activity mostly on the Republican side of US politics. Which means that they have a very out-sized voice on that side of the partisan divide, and not so much among Democratic politics. But in Republican politics, they're still a very powerful group to contend with if you're a Republican politician. So I think they're still very important. The other reason why the evangelicals are important is because of their strong support for President Trump. They voted about eight in ten for him in the 2016 election. As we've been tracking

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their favourability of President Trump, around his inauguration it was about two-thirds favourable. And it has gone up since then and has remained fairly steady around seven in ten support for the President throughout his presidency. So that remarkable stability is also really important for understanding them as a stalwart base. And, in fact, when we asked white evangelicals who said that they had a favourable view of President Trump's job performance whether there was anything he could do to lose their support, nearly four in ten reported that: "No. There is virtually nothing that President Trump could do to lose our support." (15:00)

BM: *Wow.*

RJ: So they are a very, very entrenched group in the Republican coalition – really a bedrock support of President Trump.

BM: *Wow. That's interesting, because on social media I see this idea floated by a number of people, based on mostly anecdotal evidence of young evangelicals that they've spoken to, that there's a generational gap: that older evangelicals are stalwarts of President Trump, but that younger evangelicals might be moving away from that political affiliation – as well as certain key cornerstones of what many people think of as primary evangelical issues. Is that true? Is there a change in generation?*

RJ: Well, I think there is that divide. But I think it's a little bit different than that description. So if we go back ten years ago, I think that was more true than it is today. But it is true that young evangelicals have moved. But what they have moved from is from being evangelical to be unaffiliated. So they've actually exited the category over time. And we can see that a couple of ways in the data. For example, among young people today, only eight percent identify as white evangelical Protestant, right? And again that's compared to about fifteen percent in the population. So young people are only half as likely to identify as evangelical as Americans overall. And when we look underneath the hood, and we look at the median age, for example, of white evangelicals over time, we see it creeping up. And the main reason for that is that, as they've lost members, they're disproportionately losing members from their younger ranks. So what's happening is, yes indeed, the young evangelicals of ten years ago have moved. But they've not moved over to be Democrats – or they might have – but they've mostly moved out of the whole category. They've stopped identifying as evangelical. And I think that's the real shift. So if you're looking for those people who were young evangelicals a decade ago, you should look for them in the unaffiliated category and not in the evangelical category. And what we're seeing is that, among the young people who have stayed, the generational differences are now kind-of muted.

Because the people who have stayed are actually people who hold views that are fairly consistent with

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older evangelicals. But the ones who had views, for example, that were in great tension – like on gay rights – have largely left the fold.

BM: *Wow. It's helpful to look at some of these assumptions or theories and test them against the data. So here's another thing to test against the data. I've heard a lot about the resurgence or higher visibility of progressive Christians in the United States today. I know a lot of people are watching [Reverend Barber's](#) movement for example. Does the data show increased religious affiliation, or a higher salience of religious identity among people who identify as progressive Christians today?*

RJ: Well, what I would say is, it's a little complicated. The last sort-of major study we did of this, where we looked at it very carefully, what we did see is among younger Americans under the age of thirty, there were more progressive Christians than there were conservative Christians. That's true. It's largely true, though, because of this phenomena we just talked about. That the ranks of evangelicals and other conservative, particularly white, Christians have thinned. And so as that has happened among the under-thirties, the relative ratio between progressive and conservative Christians has come more into balance. In fact, among those under thirty, there are more progressive Christians than there are conservative Christians. However, there's one category that is more than either of those, and that is the religiously unaffiliated. Because many, many young people – forty percent of young people – are in that camp. So it's notable, right, that that's creeping up to be almost half of young people, claiming no religious affiliation whatsoever. That's a really different thing, by the way, than we've ever seen in American public life. So if you take Baby Boomers back into their twenties And this is a question I get all the time: “Well, everyone's more unaffiliated in their twenties, right? You're single, maybe you're moving around a lot, you're changing jobs, you don't have kids yet, maybe? So those are all things that lead you to be more transient, less rooted in a community or a community organisation like a church, or a synagogue, or a mosque. But what we find is, if we look at the historical data and take baby boomers back into their twenties, they're still less than fifteen percent unaffiliated in their twenties. So that means that this generation is at least two-and-a-half times more unaffiliated than any generation that we have ever seen. So even if some of them – quote-unquote – “come back” as they have kids, and they settle down – they're looking for stability in communities and integrating into community life and religious institutions are a way that people historically have done that (20:00) – even if a proportion of them do that, this will still be the most unaffiliated generation the country's ever seen.

BM: *What's quite interesting to me is, when many people challenge the “secularisation thesis”, broadly, they often point to the United States as an outlier and say, “This is clearly a modern country*

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that is highly religious and continues to be highly religious. So the secularisation thesis is debunked” – besides looking at other countries around the world that are highly religious. Does this data maybe put at least an asterisk by that and say, “Well, maybe we spoke a little too soon, and the US is becoming increasingly irreligious or unaffiliated?” What does that do for our understanding of the secularisation thesis?

RJ: Yes. It's funny because we've got a UK audience here, so . . .

BM: And United States.

RJ: Yes, and US. But what's funny about this is, when I give a talk in the US and I say, “Twenty-five percent of the country is now religiously unaffiliated and forty percent of young people are religiously unaffiliated”, there are gasps in the room. Because people are shocked that there's that many people who claim no religious affiliation. If I give that same lecture in London, people would be shocked that there were that many people affiliated with religion. (Laughs).

BM: *Right.*

RJ: So I still think the US is a little bit different than Western Europe, for example, which is where it mostly gets compared. There's still more religious vibrancy here. More religious experimentation, more effervescence, I think, in the religious space than there is in Western Europe, for sure. And there's certainly not, I think, overall . . . I think politicians here face pressure to say things like “God Bless America!” at the end of their speech, in the way British politicians certainly do not. If anything there's the opposite pressure *not* to say anything overtly religious like that. So I still think there's some difference here. But I do think what we're seeing is, there is a shift here that is certainly more something in line with what we saw in the secularisation thesis. It's not an absolute outlier. It's certainly a lagger from some of the trends that we've seen in Western Europe. And I think we'll have to wait and see. So far we don't see any evidence of this upward trend in the religiously unaffiliated flat-lining. It keeps ticking up year, after year, after year.

BM: *I appreciate your cautiousness not to prognosticate – is that the right word?*

RJ: Yes! (Laughs).

BM: *But I'm going to ask you to make some predictions. Can you look out, with your crystal ball, five, ten, fifteen years? Are there any trends that you think will continue? Or things that you think we should look out for, in the next decade or so?*

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RJ: Yes: Well, yeah. Just like the financial retirement planning things, you see at the bottom, “Last years past performance is no guarantee of future returns”?

BM: *Right.*

RJ: I think that's kind of where we're at on this! But with that caveat, I will say that a couple of pieces of evidence – just to continue the unaffiliated line here – we're seeing a couple of things that I think will mean that this should continue, at least for the near future. One is that we're seeing unaffiliated people now marrying other unaffiliated people – seeking them out as marriage partners. That's significant because one of the main things pulling people back into religious community, if they've become unaffiliated, is if they marry someone religious. They have that conversation, like: “OK. Well, I'm going to get married unless you pledge to raise the kids in the church” or “in the synagogue.” And I think there's less and less of that happening. So I think that's one less thing to kind-of pull people, at least some people, back into the fold. And you know, again, so far, we haven't seen a single year in the last decade where that line has been flat. It keeps up-ticking every year. One thing I'll say, that is pretty clear from the evidence, is that one of the reasons why this change on the ground is not quite translated into the political space yet, is because of different ways that different religious groups turn out and vote. So in the US context, the ballot box tends to act a bit like a time machine. And it takes us back about ten years to where the country was about ten years ago. So the electorate in this last election . . . if you map the electorate onto the general population, the election in 2016 looks about like the general population looked in 2006.

BM: *OK. That's interesting.*

RJ: It takes us back about ten years. And that's because white evangelicals, and older white Christians, turn out and vote at much higher rates. So they're over-represented at the ballot box compared to where they are in the general population. **(25:00)** If we project that forward, what it means is, even though we've passed this threshold, for example, where the country's no longer majority white and Christian, that will not be true at the ballot box until 2024. So we're still two election cycles out from really seeing the demographic realities really hit at the ballot box.

BM: *Well that's a great place to pause on the content of all the things you've been finding. And I want to make sure we leave some time to talk about how you collect your data, to look behind the hood and look at the processes and how you set up your battery of questions. So could you tell us little bit more about that? What's it like to run a major polling firm, and how do you do what you do?*

RJ: Sure. Well it's a lot of fun, first of all! It's great to be able to sit around a table and say, “I

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wonder...X?” And, you know, think, “Well, that's an empirical question. We can actually put that to the test.” And one of the things that PRRI have pledged to do So we're a non-partisan, non-profit, independent research organisation. So, part of our charitable purpose is that we're actually putting a lot of social science data back into the public domain. So one of the things we have made sure that we do is, we are very transparent. So every time we release something, we release the whole questionnaire. We hold onto the data sets for a year for internal purposes, for analysis, but after that we release the entire data set out into the public domain. So anyone can pull it up – at the [Roper Center](#), they can pull it off of our website, and download, and do their own analysis of the data. So that's part of our mission. In terms of how we collect it, we are dedicated, really, to doing full probability sampling of data. So all of our data is a random probability sample of the USs population. It's all Americans. So even though we have an emphasis on mostly doing political party, and religion, and race, and other kinds of demographic breaks, we have full-bound samples of the entire population in all of our surveys here. And you know, we really do sit down, and we do our lit review, you know: the process where we look at other polls and what they have asked, and other trends we might want to check. But I think one of the things we are always trying to get at is the “Why” question. And so, not just the “What”, but the “whys”. We definitely want to know what people believe, but we also want to know what connects belief A with belief B, and belief C. What's the underlying thing that drive them to connect those issues together? So that, I think, is part of the art of this, and I think what makes it, really, the most fun and the most worthwhile.

BM: *It sounds so fun, in fact, that our Listeners might be wondering how they can get involved. So do you have any ideas for scholars out there who sit there and wonder if X,Y or Z about the American population . . .?Are there ways for them to try to do polling, or to reach out to your kind of organisations, to feed you ideas? Or what's the process, if you're a scholar in a university, for trying to find out some of this information at a national scale?*

RJ: Well, there's a couple of options. I mean, I get emails all the time – and I love getting emails all the time – saying, “Hey, have you thought about this?” And every now and then, there's like “Oh man! That's a great idea!” And if we have space, we can do it. So I would say, feel free to shoot us an email. And we certainly are interested in hearing what's going on, and ideas that are out there. The other way is, we have formally partnered with a number of universities. So we were just . . . this past three years we did a three-wave study with Florida State University, looking at spirituality and its impact on voluntarism and other kinds of pro-social behaviours, trying to answer the question, “Does it make a difference if you're religious or not, for how you actually behave in the world?” And trying to get at those kind of questions (30:00). We've partnered with the [Brookings Institution](#) and other kinds of

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think-tanks in this space. So I think it's a little of both. We've done some individual kinds of things, but we've also worked on kind-of careful, multi-year, full-on collaborations with academic institutions.

BM: *And your work is entirely focussed in the United States, is that right?*

RJ: It is, yes. So we just do domestic religion, politics and culture.

BM: *And do you consult with folks outside the United States who might be interested in this kind of work in other countries? Or do you have any partnerships? Or share ideas for best practices with organisations outside the US?*

RJ: We've certainly been talking about this. We haven't, so far, branched out beyond that. But it's something we'd certainly be open to doing.

BM: *Great. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me today. I think this time really flew by for me. I enjoyed our conversation. I want to remind our Listeners that you can download all of the reports from the Public Religion Research Institute – PRRI – at prri.org. And if you're looking for [contact information](#) for folks at the organisation you can find that on their website. And we encourage you to check out the American Values Atlas Project, which has a lot of the data that we've been speaking about today. So thank you again, Robby, for an excellent conversation. And I hope our Listeners enjoyed it as well.*

RJ: Great, Thank you. Yes, it was a lot of fun.

BM: Thanks.

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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