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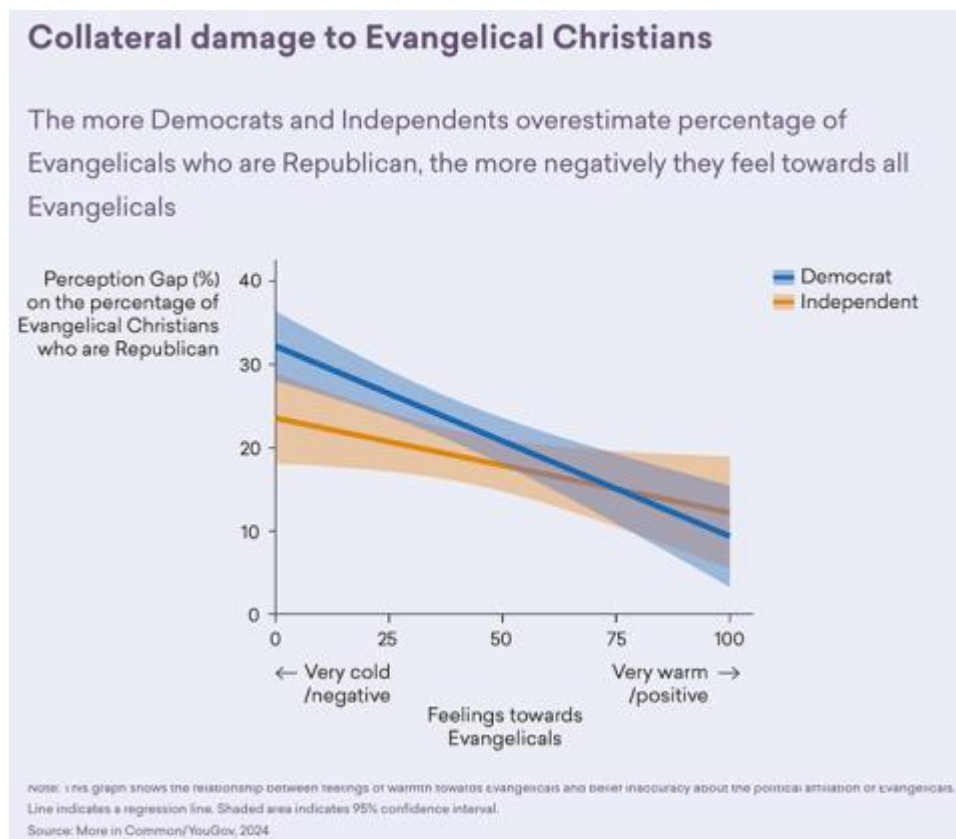
The group [More in Common](#) released a report last week that, as the group's name suggests, aims to debunk myths about the divisions in American society, specifically those related to religion. "[Promising Revelations: Undoing the False Impressions of America's Faithful](#)" is based on polling and focus groups conducted by the organization and explores the "perception gaps" it asserts exist within our culture.

The three "big myths" the report confronts are:

1. Faith is driven by politics;
2. Faith is becoming irrelevant;
3. Religious people are intolerant.

To be sure, these myths exist. As Commonweal's executive director [Ellen Koneck](#) said at a briefing for journalists where this report was released, "These misperceptions are vast." I would add that they are also deep, old and complicated.

You can choose any decade in American history, from the colonial era to the present, and find preachers wrestling with the political implications of the faith and trying to protect religious institutions from, or actively promote an alliance with, various political forces of the day. So, too, there is no decade in which many preachers did not bemoan the faithlessness of the American people. And, of course, religious people like others are quick to identify the intolerance speck in others' eyes, even while unwilling or unable to recognize the plank of intolerance in their own.



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It is an open question whether polling is the best way to get at these realities.

"Americans often overestimate the importance Evangelicals and Catholics place on their political identity and partisan affiliation," the report states. "For example, non-Evangelicals overestimate by ten times how much Evangelicals say political party affiliation is their most important identity (41% estimate versus 4% reality), and overestimate percentage of Evangelicals who say 'being a good Christian means supporting the Republican Party' (55% estimate versus 20% in reality)."

I read that and wonder how many evangelicals know that confessing to an overt political influence to a pollster is a bad look, and so they do not answer candidly. Or how many do not realize the degree to which politicized religion is in the air they breathe, not something they may talk about, but something that is deeply, if unconsciously, present.

The more interesting conclusion in this first section of the study had to do with what it terms "collateral contempt." The study states:

Our research found that Democrats and Independents who overestimate the percentage of Evangelicals who are Republican tend to have more negative views towards all Evangelicals. We call this phenomenon "**collateral contempt**," where negative feelings towards political opponents extend to religious groups perceived as aligned with one political party.

In this election season, when everyone is stoked to believe the worst about everyone else, this collateral contempt is a deep wound in our civic culture.

Thirty-one percent of Catholics self-identified as Republican, but non-Catholics estimated that 53% of Catholics were Republican, according to the report. I suspect a follow-up question about people who self-identify as "independent" but who lean Republican might have narrowed the gap.

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Unsurprisingly, the report found that the more a person self-identifies as liberal, and very liberal, the greater their misperceptions of evangelicals. Interestingly, higher social media usage also correlates with misperceptions of evangelicals.

On the other hand, "Our analysis found no strong predictors of misperceptions about how much Catholics prioritize political identities. **Political ideology** and **negative feelings** towards Catholics appear to influence the misperception that Catholics think being a good Christian means supporting the Republican Party."

The report also found that "Democrats who overestimate the percentage of Republicans among Catholics tend to have more negative views towards all Catholics — misdirecting their partisan hostility and contempt towards an entire faith group due to their perceived political affiliation."

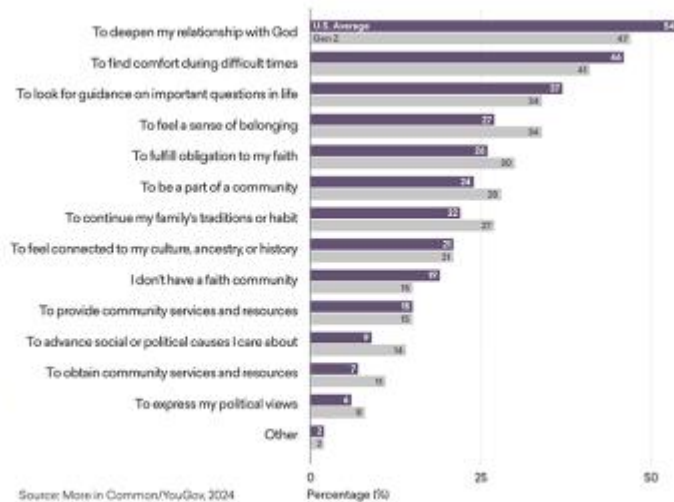
In the second section of the study, dealing with the idea that religion is in decline, the report concludes that younger people do turn to faith, but they do so differently and, yes, slightly less often than their predecessors.

"Gen Z is slightly less likely than the national average to turn to faith communities to deepen their relationship with God," the report states. "Rather, they are more likely than older generations to turn to their respective faith traditions for belonging and community."

Gen Z are more likely than average to turn to faith for belonging and community

Why do you turn to your faith or faith communities?
Select all that apply.

faithperceptiongap.us



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So, when asked why they turn to faith or faith communities, 54% of all Americans chose "to deepen my relationship with God." Forty-seven percent of Gen Z made the same choice.

Conversely, while only 27% of all Americans choose "to feel a sense of belonging," 34% of Gen Z selected that answer.

Fourteen percent of Gen Z and 9% of all Americans selected "to advance social or political causes I care about," prompting Koneck to ask: "Is religion insufficiently political?"

If I had been taking the survey, I would have selected "other" and noted, "I turn to faith and my faith community because I believe that what it claims to be revealed by God is true." It is strange to me that none of the options reflected any concern with the veracity of the claims religion makes.

It was heartwarming to find 26% answered "to fulfill obligation to my faith." A religion that does not involve some binding obligations is a lifestyle choice, not a religion. The Latin root, the verb *religare* means "to bind" and the noun *religio* is the "bond."

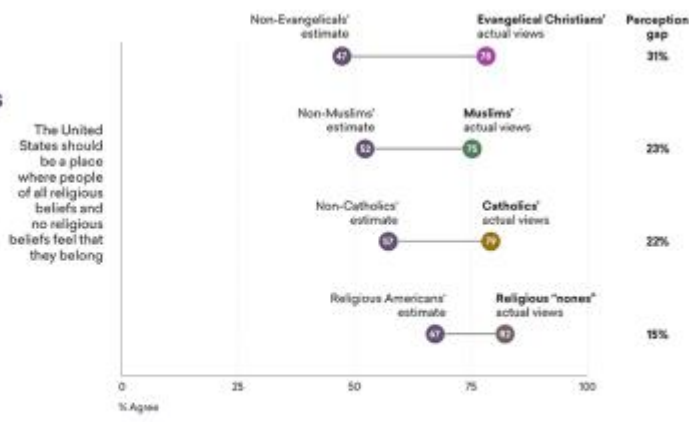
American religion has long existed in a privatized key, something that is antithetical to our Catholic ecclesiology. We expect people to attend Mass, not just pray at home. We have a deep and profound social teaching. The word "catholic" means "universal," that is, nonsectarian.

Yet Catholicism in the U.S., like other religions, is seeing a decline in attendance at communal services and lower participation in church life. It is often that logistical factors like the kids' soccer games now intrude, but it is also the case that Americans today privatize their religion.

Americans underestimate support for religious pluralism among Evangelical Christians, Catholics, Muslims, and Religious "nones"

The United States should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong

Note: Each estimate does represent the estimate of a faith group's views by those outside that group. For instance, the first estimate does show the percentage of Evangelical Christians that non-Evangelicals think agree with the statement "The United States should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong." The corresponding perception gap shows the disparity between what non-Evangelicals imagine Evangelicals to believe and what Evangelicals actually believe. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2014



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Koneck recalled University of Notre Dame sociologist [Christian Smith's thesis](#) that "moralistic, therapeutic deism" has become the default religion of many young Americans. While this report did not ask the questions Smith did, nothing in the findings contradict his important, if depressing, conclusions.

The final section on religious tolerance is important. Again, I worry that people know they shouldn't tell a pollster they are intolerant, so I do not entirely trust self-reporting in this area. Still, it was hopeful to find that 81% of Americans concur with the statement, "The United States should be a place where individuals of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong."

I was surprised that the religious group with the lowest percentage agreeing with that statement was Muslims, at 75%. I would have thought their experience of being a minority would have increased their attentiveness to the need for religious tolerance.

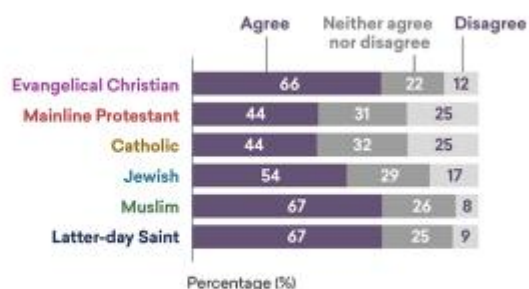
Thirty-two percent of Catholics agreed with the statement, "My religion is under attack in America," exactly half of the 62% of evangelicals who agree with that statement. Are they wrong? It depends on how you define "my religion."

If you think protecting the sanctity of unborn life or defending traditional definitions of marriage are part of "my religion," then of course you would concur with this statement. We need pastors who point out that there is not a single direct moral claim in the Nicene Creed! Much is implied. That is why we have moral theology.

Over half of Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints feel judged or misrepresented by political and media elites

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

"Political and media elites misrepresent my religion."



Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Source: More in Common/YouGov 2024

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Interestingly, Catholics and mainline Protestants were the only groups that did not have a majority agreeing with the statement, "Political and media elites misrepresent my religion." I would be among the 44% of Catholics who do concur with that statement, and concur profoundly. The story of American Catholicism is a story of assimilation to the ambient culture, but it is time, past time, we recognize there are limits to that story.

The comments about Pope Francis reflect the degree to which political views color and shape ecclesial ones, and they are disturbing. "I feel like this pope especially has gotten more politicized. I feel like he's not making decisions based on the beliefs of most Catholics. Rather, he's doing what would look right," said Victor, a 24-year-old white, Catholic, conservative Republican man from New York.

God bless Victor, but every part of his comment is wrong.

These kinds of studies are useful because they remind us of the great variety of religious experiences and attitudes that people have. The report usefully clarifies some misperceptions Americans harbor about one another. Politics is more of a driver of religious attitudes than people admit to themselves, and this report fails to confront that bias in self-reporting adequately. On the other hand, its warning to all of us to avoid collateral contempt for one another is important.

For Catholics, the report demonstrates we have a lot of catechetical work to do in helping our people understand what we believe, and how we should treat those who believe differently.