

September 2024

# Promising Revelations:

Undoing the False Impressions of America's Faithful

Executive Summary



More in  
Common

## ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

The report was conducted by More in Common U.S., part of a non-partisan, international initiative aimed at building societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government in order to connect people across lines of division.

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### More in Common

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## Foreword

### **The limits of our imagination are often determined by what we believe is real.**

Right now, what we believe is real about America's polarization is making it harder for us to find ways out. Americans are feeling profoundly exhausted by polarization, struggling to see how we move ahead. And often the places that could energize and enable efforts to bring us back together—including faith, as the pages to follow highlight—are perceived more as accelerants to division than as off-ramps.

The focus of this report is on misperceptions, or perception gaps, about religion in America. We misunderstand each other when we uncritically accept narratives that Evangelicals are chiefly concerned with politics, that the relevance of religion is fading, that young generations feel distant from their faiths, and that religious Americans are mostly intolerant of others.

The findings in this study challenge some key parts of the story that we have been hearing about our polarized landscape. From conversations and surveys with a representative national sample of more than 6,000 Americans, the evidence shows something different to what we might expect: more shared values, more desire to keep faith distinct from partisan politics, more longing to transcend divisions, more respect for each other, more commitment to pluralism, and more desire for guidance and help from local faith leaders and institutions in navigating this difficult time in American life. We also find less intolerance towards other faiths, and less of a generation gap within faith communities.

What the findings add up to is this: to disrupt the dynamics of polarization, we do not need to look too far afield. If change is to happen, it is likely to begin in our local communities, and churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples are important places where millions of people regularly gather in their local communities week after week—alongside, of course, more secular places such as workplaces, schools, social clubs, and sports activities. From the pews and prayer mats, it feels more possible to imagine an America less divided than it is today. And as this report finds, a majority of Americans who practice a faith say that they are looking to their religious leaders to better understand how to navigate our polarized landscape.

America's political divisions are likely to get worse—maybe, much worse—before they get better. But whether the future brings a slow calcification of our divisions or an escalation of political violence, we come back to the same question: how do we disrupt the dynamics of polarization, and find those off-ramps?

As trust in national institutions continues to be undermined and authorities of all kinds are questioned, local places of worship are likely becoming even more important for Americans of faith to find belonging, connection, and spiritual direction—in short, for making it through difficult and divided times.

This report suggests that America's faithful can and should be playing a greater role in depolarization efforts in the U.S., and several initiatives are already making progress.<sup>1</sup> America's polarization is not simple, but nor is it insoluble. We need to understand it, so we can fix it. And we need to cast a vision for how that can be done. This report highlights several areas that More in Common will prioritize. We hope it can also help inform and inspire others for this urgent work.

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Boorstein, "A New Movement Aims to Remake Evangelicals' Relationship to Politics," *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/08/03/trump-evangelicals-movement/>

# Executive Summary

**One characteristic of a deeply polarized society is that opposing groups often hold distorted views of their opponents, vastly overestimating the extent to which the other side holds extreme views. We can better understand the root causes of conflict, and how we might change those dynamics, when we identify the misperceptions—or perception gaps—which lie behind the animosity and fears between different groups.**

This study finds significant perception gaps relating to faith in America today. It draws on research involving a representative sample of over 6,000 Americans from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Latter-day Saint communities, as well as Americans of no faith in 2023 and 2024.

The project examines how Americans are navigating the country's deep polarization from the perspective of their faith identities. It draws upon More in Common's past work on the dynamics of polarization through the lens of ordinary Americans<sup>2</sup> and the concept of perception gaps.<sup>3</sup> It examines not only how groups perceive—and often misperceive—one another, but also the consequences of those assumptions. As people of faith tell their own stories in surveys and focus group interviews, important truths emerge both about the role that politics is playing in religious communities, and the unifying potential of spiritual belief.

## Misperception 1: Faith is all about politics

There are big gaps between most Americans' perceptions and the reality of the role of politics in religious life, especially as it relates to Evangelical Christian communities. Our research found that **non-Evangelicals significantly overestimate the importance Evangelicals place on their political identity and partisan affiliation.** For example, non-Evangelicals overestimate by ten times how much Evangelicals say political party affiliation is their most important identity (41 percent estimate versus 4 percent reality).

Non-Evangelicals also often overestimate the percentage of Evangelicals who are Republican (63 percent estimate versus 46 percent in reality). These misperceptions carry significant consequences. Our research found that Democrats and Independents who overestimate the percentage of Republicans among Evangelicals tend to have more negative views towards all Evangelicals. We call this phenomenon "**collateral contempt**"—**the tendency for animosity towards political opponents to spill over to religious groups that are perceived to be aligned with one political team.** In our climate of heightened political polarization, political association can lead to generalized hostility towards entire faith communities based on their supposed political affiliation.

In reality, Evangelical Christians have a wide range of political views. For Evangelical Christians, religion, family role, and American identity are more important than

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hawkins et al., *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape* (More in Common, 2018), [hiddentribes.us](http://hiddentribes.us).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Yudkin et al., *The Perception Gap: How False Impressions Are Pulling Americans Apart* (More in Common, 2019), [perceptiongap.us](http://perceptiongap.us).

their partisan attachments. **The overwhelming norm among America’s religious populations, including among Evangelicals, is that spiritual life is not a political arena.** Americans of faith in general are mostly hesitant to discuss political issues in religious settings, although American Jews and Muslims are slightly more supportive of political discussions. This is especially the case for local politics or issues most pertinent to their communities, such as anti-Jewish/Muslim discrimination and Israel/Palestine. **How a person votes is not seen by most as a litmus test for whether or not they are a “good” Christian, Jew, or Muslim.** Instead, their moral values, relationship with God, and the spiritual edification they experience as part of a faith community are seen as much more important.

## **Misperception 2: Faith is becoming irrelevant in Americans’ lives**

Americans also have significant perception gaps when it comes to understanding how important faith is to their fellow citizens, especially to younger generations. Reports about the increase in religious “nones”—the population who identify as having no religious affiliation—and declining membership of some Mainline Protestant churches do capture important trends in American society. **But the general public underestimates the value Americans, especially younger Americans, still place on personal faith and belonging to faith communities.** In fact, our research found that most Americans (73 percent) see their faith as an important part of who they are. Young generations of Jewish and Muslim Americans, in particular, value their Jewish and Muslim identity much more than commonly assumed.

While faith remains a crucial part of how many Americans see themselves, the decline in trust in institutions is impacting Americans’ relationship with religious institutions and houses of worship. Local faith communities or houses of worship face increased competition in their role of offering spiritual authority and guidance, yet they do offer a sense of belonging that is still prized by younger Americans.

## **Misperception 3: Religious Americans are intolerant**

Americans also have sizable perception gaps on issues concerning the role of religion in public life, and often misperceive religious Americans to be broadly intolerant of other faiths. **The majority of Americans across religious groups value religious pluralism and want the United States to be a place where people of all religions feel that they belong.** For example, this ideal is shared by the majority of American Evangelicals (78 percent) and Muslims (75 percent), yet the general public imagines that only around half of Evangelicals and Muslims are supportive of religious pluralism.

At the same time, many Americans see the United States as a country founded on values inspired by Christian principles, often citing the religious beliefs of some Founding Fathers and some of the ideals embedded in the founding documents. However, **most do not see a conflict between recognizing the many ways in which Christianity shaped America through past centuries, and their personal commitment to building a pluralistic society.** Very few support exclusionary measures that prioritize the rights of one religious group over others, such as requiring religious qualifications for elected office. This duality in Americans’ beliefs underscores the need to draw a clear distinction between Americans who believe it is important to recognize the distinctive history of Christianity in America, and those who are supportive of exclusionary policies based on religious beliefs and ethnic origins.

Perceptions that faith is all about politics, decline, or intolerance, flatten the rich diversity of faith communities into simplistic caricatures. These distortions are felt. More than half of American Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints feel that their groups are judged more than others. Around two thirds of Muslims, Latter-day Saints, and Evangelicals feel misrepresented by political and media elites.

For Jewish and Muslim Americans, the feelings of being misunderstood and misrepresented are compounded by threats to their physical safety. Over four in ten Muslims and Jews in America feel or have felt unsafe in the past year due to their religious identity. Many have at times felt hesitant to share their Muslim or Jewish identity. The sense of insecurity, anxiety, and alienation has only intensified after the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, the subsequent war in Gaza, and increased incidents of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate crimes in the U.S.

False perceptions not only make many faithful Americans feel misunderstood, they also obscure the common civic and moral values shared by Americans regardless of religious affiliation. And this common ground is abundant. Around nine in ten Americans, including the overwhelming majority across faith traditions, say that believing in freedom of speech, equal rights for all, freedom of religion, and accepting people of diverse racial and religious backgrounds is important to being American. Most Americans also value kindness to others and respect for human dignity, whether as part of their faith or personal convictions. This substantive commonality in what people think it means to be a moral person and lead a good life is often underappreciated.

When we steer away from misperceptions and stop seeing faith through a political lens, we open ourselves to hearing new stories that humanize fellow Americans. In a moment defined by polarization and fracture, many values and life goals that Americans cherish transcend religious boundaries, and could be used as a basis for more productive dialogue and relationship-building between different communities.

By illuminating these misperceptions, we also hope to provide a clearer understanding of how polarization is affecting faith communities. This report provides five case studies that examine the different ways communities are experiencing conflict and division. While most Americans of faith say that their congregations are not as politically polarized as the country generally, religious communities are far from being immune to division. Some have become combatants in America's culture wars and partisan politics. Others have experienced intense conflict over abortion, LGBTQ+ marriage, and women's ordination, and many are navigating deep disagreements and ruptured relationships due to the Israel-Hamas war and its ramifications in the U.S.

Despite these experiences of conflict, the larger picture emerging from this research is that faith leaders are well positioned to mitigate the toxic national polarization that faces the country. Despite the erosion of trust in institutions in recent years, faith leaders remain among the most trusted people in their local communities. Around half of Americans who regularly attend religious services want their religious leaders to provide guidance on navigating division, cultural changes, and talking to people with different political views. That special position of trust provides a platform for America's faith leaders to play a greater role in bridging divides. Faith leaders can counter polarization by drawing on rich resources rooted in their faith traditions. Highlighting shared values and practices such as self-reflection, humility, kindness, and dignity, faith leaders can build common ground, reduce fear, and foster unity. As one of the few institutions with the potential to counter deepening political self-segregation, faith leaders and their communities can help build a stronger sense of belonging and social cohesion together.

