

News Watch Article: DP540

WHAT WE THINK, WHAT WE BELIEVE, HOW WE ACT

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The good news? Faith is “in.” The bad news? Discernment is apparently “out.” Many people, including many Christians, think faith and reason are mutually exclusive; the truly “spiritual” among us *experience* God, we don’t presume to *test* our faith. This should concern Christians who believe that one must test what one believes by critical inquiry and evidence; in other words, one must have a *reasonable* faith.

Christians Among Us. An ABC News/Beliefnet poll shows that 83 percent of American adults are Christians. A comparable Barna poll affirms that the percentage of Christians in America is about the same as it was in the 1990s, with three important rises: (1) weekly church attendance is up at 43 percent of adults, (2) weekly Bible reading (excluding during church) is up at 42 percent, and (3) adult Sunday School attendance is higher at 25 percent than it has been since the late 1980s.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll on American faith showed most people (67 percent) believe the United States is a Christian nation and that America’s strength is based on religious faith (58 percent); nevertheless, in a seemingly contradictory finding, a much higher majority (84 percent) say religious belief isn’t necessary for good citizenship. A *U.S. News and World Report/PBS’s Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* poll says that “nearly two-thirds” of Americans say religion is very important in their lives, while “more than 4 out of 5” say they have “experienced God’s presence or a spiritual force.” More than 75 percent of Americans say that our nation’s religious diversity is a source of strength.

When it comes to particular faiths, according to Barna a high majority of Americans (75 percent)¹ say “many religions can lead to eternal life,” while a slim majority (54 percent) consider atheism “unfavorable.” According to the *U.S. News* poll, 70 percent of Americans say “spiritual experiences” are the most important part of religion. Pollster George Gallup thinks this strong affirmation of religious pluralism accounts for some seemingly contradictory polling results: “In some polls, you have Christians saying, ‘Yes, Jesus is the only way’ and also ‘Yes, there are many paths to God.’ It’s not that Americans don’t believe anything; they believe everything.”

More than 80 percent think religion should have a greater influence in American life, while a scant majority (52 percent) says religious influence in America is waning. A Barna poll showed that Protestants are still far more populous in America than Catholics, although Protestants account for only 53 percent of the population, down from nearly 70 percent 25 years ago.

Religious pluralism in America remains more talk than fact: only 6.5 percent of Americans are non-Christian, according to the *U.S. News* poll, although that percentage is growing and Buddhists outnumber Presbyterians while Muslims are nearly as numerous as Jews, who account for around two percent of the American population. According to *U.S. News and World Report* (6 May 2002), the decline in the Jewish population is due, in large part, to 51 percent of Jews marrying outside their faith, and to Judaism’s rejection of proselytizing.

Muslims Among Us. The Pew survey, conducted after the terrorist attacks of September 11, indicated that most Americans (54 percent) have a favorable opinion of Muslim Americans and believe that Islam does not encourage violence (51 percent). The *U.S. News* poll says 37 percent of Americans have an “unfavorable” view of Islam, and 40 percent say Islam has more “violent extremists” than other religions.

The number of Muslims in the United States is evidently much lower than often reported in the popular press. Two surveys correct previous broad assumptions by careful polling and statistical analysis. Tom W. Smith, of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, says the results of their study pins the actual number of Muslims in America to between 1.9 and 2.8 million, compared to the 7 million or so usually reported. Another study, by a sociologist at City University of New York, produced a similar, though smaller, statistic — 1.1 million adults and 650,000 children. Sociologist Egon Mayer says this shows a doubling of the American Muslim population in the 1990s.

Previous estimates, more than three times the number generated by the new studies, were criticized for unwarranted assumptions and guesses not backed up by field research. The American Muslim Council (AMC) denounced the NORC survey as evidence of Jewish groups “persecuting the persecuted,” noting that discrimination against Muslims has increased since September 11. The NORC survey, published by the American Jewish Committee, polled 50,000 American households over six months and confirmed the polling results by INS data and census records for “country of origin.”

The “Mosaic” Generation on Life, Morality, and Faith. The generation in high school and college today, dubbed the “mosaic” generation, is a surprising mix of conservative and liberal, religious and not so religious. Drug, alcohol, and cigarette use among high schoolers is lower than at any time in the past 15 years. When the statistic is broken down, illicit drug use is down to 22.3 percent, alcohol 65 percent, and cigarette smoking 36 percent. The 2001–2002 Pride Survey polled 101,882 students in 21 states. The survey also found that kids who are warned away from drugs and encouraged to engage in extracurricular activities were less likely to use drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes. Another strong factor was church attendance: 13 percent of those who attended religious services “a lot” were users, while 36 percent used among kids who “never” attended religious services.

According to another national study, “Youth and Religion: A Nation of Young Believers,” 83.7 percent of young people said religion was “important” in their lives, 45.6 percent said they had attended a worship service three or more times in the previous month, and 41.2 percent participated in a religiously organized activity (such as youth group or Bible study).

Similar research by the Barna Research Group discovered that more than 60 percent of teens identify themselves as “spiritual,” but spiritual goals and life outcomes are surprisingly not among the top-rated goals teens have. Teens identifying themselves as born again account for 33 percent of those polled, while only 4 percent also affirm the evangelical standards of the accuracy of the Bible, responsibility to evangelize, salvation by grace alone, and orthodox views on God, Jesus, and Satan. Barna attributes this low figure to “growing numbers of teenagers who accept moral relativism and pluralistic theology as their faith foundation.” Barna polls also indicate that only 32 percent of those who are born again said they believe in moral absolutes.

Moral Relativism Tops the Charts. The influence of moral relativism among teens is evident on the college level, too. While a Zogby International poll of college seniors found that 97 percent said their college studies had prepared them to be ethical in their careers, a stunning 73 percent said the ethics instruction they received was decidedly pluralistic. They were taught that what is right and wrong depends on individual values and cultural diversity.

No wonder, then, that a New York professor’s study of his own students a few years ago uncovered a 10 to 20 percent segment that could not define the Nazi extermination of the Jews as “wrong.” Their refusal to brand those actions morally wrong came from a belief that, despite their personal *dislike* of such actions, the Nazis could not be judged from those outside their own culture, and no one can successfully challenge another’s moral worldview.

Among older adults, according to two Barna polls, 60 percent of people 36 and older held to moral relativism, while 75 percent of the adults 18 to 35 did so. Among teens, only nine percent of born-again respondents affirmed moral absolutes (compared to four percent of the non-born-again teens).

Small wonder, then, that Stanley Fish, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, recently argued for a postmodern approach to political analysis in the quarterly political journal *The Responsive Community*.² Fish argued that a postmodern approach to the terrorist acts of September 11 would focus not on the inherent moral wrong of the acts, but instead on the “competing claims” on both sides. The claims would not be supported by evidence or objective standards, but by “received authorities, sacred texts, exemplary achievements, and generally accepted benchmarks.” According to Fish, postmodernists don’t deny the existence of truth, or of objective morality, but they deny that such truths can be known or, even if known, they could not be communicated convincingly to an opponent. Truth, for Fish, is acknowledged by societies not on the basis of undisputed truth, but on “power, reward, or rhetoric.”

According to Barna, the most common basis for moral decision-making among teens is “doing whatever feels right or comfortable in a given situation.” This view was affirmed by 38 percent of teens and 31 percent of adults. Only 7 percent of teens and 18 percent of adults said the Bible was their basis for morality. George Barna noted, “Substantial numbers of Christians believe that activities such as abortion, gay sex, sexual fantasies, cohabitation, drunkenness and viewing pornography are morally acceptable. The result is a mentality that esteems pluralism, relativism, tolerance, and diversity without critical reflection of the implications of particular views and actions.”

-- Gretchen Passantino

NOTES

1. Confirmed by figures from the *U.S. News* poll.
2. Fish popularized these views in a Harper magazine article, “Postmodern Warfare: The Ignorance of Our War Intellectuals,” and in an opinion article in *The New York Times*.