

Probe Religious Views Study 2020 – Do Christians Believe in Christ as the Only Savior of the World?

Steve Cable explores the results of Probe's new 2020 survey, examining what people believe about Jesus in His time on earth, and His claim to be the only way to the Father.

Our 2020 survey reveals a striking decline in evangelical religious beliefs and practices over the last ten years. In our first article, we saw a significant degradation in the percentage of American young adults who are born again^{[1](#)} and profess a biblically informed worldview^{[2](#)}. Perhaps a biblical worldview, as defined by the set of questions we used, is not an accurate gauge of an orthodox Christian belief.

In this article, we will look at several other areas designed to identify those people who closely align their thoughts with the teaching of the Bible. We will look at two areas of belief for all American young adults and for Born Again Protestants in greater detail:

1. Do you believe in some critical aspects of Jesus Christ and His time on earth?
2. Do you believe that Jesus was right in saying “No one comes to the Father except by Me”?

We will look at these two areas alone and then see how those with a biblical worldview align with these questions.

Topic 1: What About Jesus and His Time on

Earth?

In our survey, we asked three questions specifically about Jesus. The first question was about what caused Jesus to die on a cross as given below.

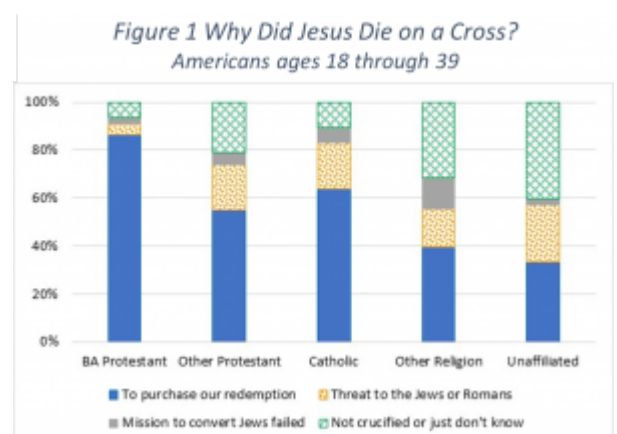
1. Why did Jesus die on a cross?

- a. He threatened the Roman authorities' control over Israel.
- b. He threatened the stature of the Jewish leaders of the day.
- c. To redeem us by taking our sins and our punishment upon Himself.
- d. He never died on a cross.
- e. He failed in his mission to convert the Jewish people into believers.
- f. I don't know.

The responses for ages 18 through 39 are shown in Figure 1. As shown, Born Again Protestants have a far greater percentage, over 85%, stating that Jesus was crucified to purchase our redemption. One would suspect that all Protestant and Catholic leaders

would want their people to know that Jesus' death on the cross was for their redemption. Yet, less than two thirds of each group selected that answer. Note that the answer to this question did not say that salvation was through grace alone. So even those with a works-based gospel should still select that answer.

A fair number of Other Protestants and Catholics (about 20% of each group) said that either the Jewish leaders or the Romans caused Jesus' death on the cross. But any Christian should realize that Jesus had to choose crucifixion. Prior attempts



by authoritative groups demonstrated that they could not lay a hand on him otherwise.

Interestingly, about 40% of Other Religions and 30% of the Unaffiliated say Jesus died to redeem us. They understand this is what Christians say about Jesus' crucifixion. It is the best answer for them because it doesn't say that Jesus' death actually worked to redeem us, only that He did it to redeem us. Also note that roughly one third of the Other Religion category is made up of people who affiliate with Christian cults, e.g. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

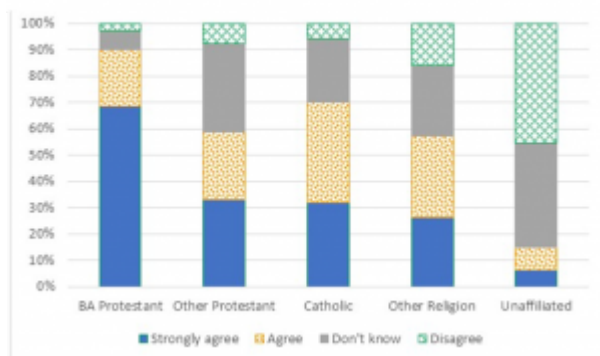
The second question is:

2. Jesus will return to this earth to save those who await His coming.

a. **Answers ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.**

This question is almost a quote of Hebrews 9:27-28 ESV, "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." As you can see, this verse answers question 1 and question 2. The apostle Paul writing in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 says, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." He makes it clear that the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to call us to Himself.

Figure 2 Jesus Will Return to Save Us
Americans Ages 18 through 39



The results for this question follow a similar pattern to those for the first question above with a little less surety shown among Christians. As shown, just over two thirds of Born Again Protestants strongly agree that Jesus will return to save. Meaning that almost one

third of them are not absolutely sure of Jesus' return.

For other Christian groups, only about one third of them strongly agree with this statement. Almost one third say they Disagree or Don't Know about this statement.

Once again, over half of those affiliated with Other Religions affirm what they believe to be taught by the Christian religion. At the same time, the Unaffiliated continue to show that very few of them affirm any Christian beliefs.

The third question (also used for determining a Basic Biblical Worldview) is:

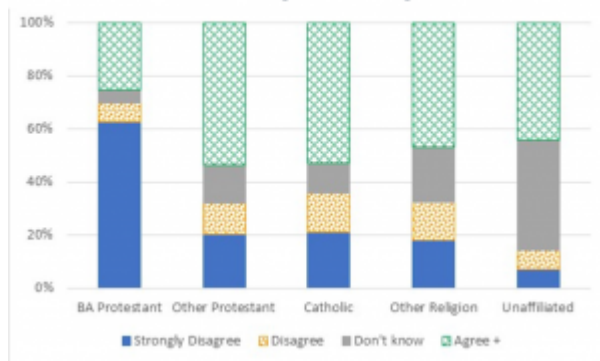
3. When He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.

a. **Answers ranging from Agree Strongly to Disagree Strongly**

The Bible clearly states that Jesus lived a sinless life. For example, Hebrews 4:15 ESV states, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, **yet without sin.**" And again in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made the one who did **not know sin** to be sin for us so that in Him we would become the righteousness of God." As indicated in this verse, God laid our sins upon Jesus in His earthly death. Jesus did not sin but He carried our sins to the cross and the grave to redeem us. If Jesus were a sinner like you and me, His death would have been for His own sin rather than for the

sins of the world.

*Figure 3 Jesus Committed Sins Like Other People
Americans Ages 18 through 39*



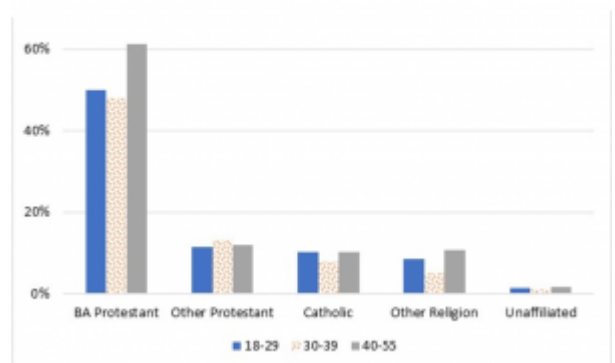
Young adult American beliefs about this statement follow a similar pattern as the first two questions. Once again, about one third of Born Again Protestants either Don't Know or Agree with this statement. Having this large a number of Born Again Protestants who don't accept a primary belief of Biblical Christianity is disappointing.

However, four out of five respondents who affiliated with Other Protestant or Catholic beliefs do not strongly believe that Jesus lived a sinless life. The Unaffiliated group continues to show their aversion to accepting any Christian religious doctrines.

Accepting a Doctrinally Consistent Set of Beliefs

What happens when we look at how many Born Again Protestants take a biblically consistent view on all three of these questions? Consider the results shown in Figure 4. First, we see that young adult Born Again Protestants drop from about two thirds for the individual questions down to about one half when looking at all three questions. It appears that about one half of those categorized as Born Again Protestants are trusting Jesus to save them but do not have a good understanding of biblical teaching on Jesus.

Figure 4 A Biblical Position on Jesus Christ



As you can see, all other religious groups drop to around one in ten or less with a good understanding of Jesus. The

Unaffiliated drop to a level that is basically zero. In toto, about one out of six Americans age 55 and under have an understanding of who Jesus really is in these three fundamental areas.

Does Having a Basic Biblical Worldview Equate to Having a Biblical Understanding of Jesus?

For most people it does. Approximately 90% of people with a Basic Biblical Worldview have a biblical understanding of Jesus, i.e. answer the three Jesus questions from a biblical perspective. This finding (especially if true across other questions where many Born Again Christians ascribe to an unbiblical viewpoint) is important because the four simple questions which define a Basic Biblical Worldview identifies a set of people who also take a biblical view of Jesus' purpose.

Topic 2: Are there multiple ways to heaven?

Pluralism is the belief that there are multiple ways to obtain a right relationship with God, including most if not all world religions. The Bible is very clear on how people can be reconciled to God and obtain eternal life. First, we cannot receive it through our own efforts at righteous living. This truth is addressed throughout the New Testament including Romans 3:23, "For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And Titus 3:5, "He saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of his mercy . . ."

Second, we cannot receive it by placing our faith in some other person or deity. If we try, we are still weighed down by our sin, and that other person or deity has no standing before the living God. Even an angel of the living God has no standing on which to intercede for our salvation as we see in Hebrews 2:5, "For He did not put the world to come, about which we have been speaking, under the control of

angels.”

The only way God could redeem us was through the sacrifice of Jesus, fully God and fully man. As Romans goes on to say in 3:24, “But they are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” And Titus 3:5 continues, “[T]hrough the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us in full measure through Jesus Christ our savior.”

Jesus clearly stated, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” The high price of degradation and suffering paid through Jesus’ life and death excludes the possibility of Jesus being just one of several options offered by God.

What do Americans believe about multiple ways to heaven? And, especially what do Born Again Christians believe? To determine who was a pluralist, we asked what the respondents thought about the following two statements:

1. Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God.

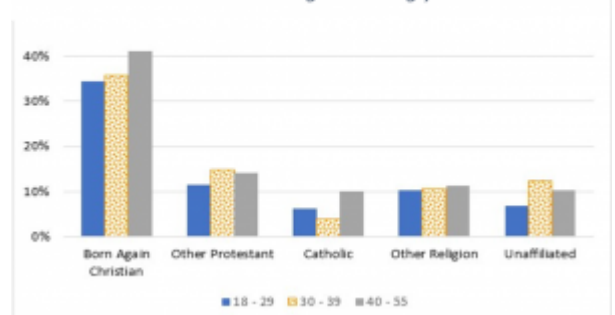
Answers from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly

2. I believe that the only way to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ. **Answers from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly**

Who Believes in Multiple Ways to God

First let’s look at just question number one across the various religious groups, looking for the answer **Disagree strongly** as shown in Figure 5{3}. If someone disagrees with this statement, they could be a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist, etc. The first thing you may notice is that all religious groups other than Born Again Christian all

Figure 5 Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus are All Valid Ways to God: Disagree Strongly



congregate around 5% to 15%. So, for all these groups, around one in ten people take a strong non-pluralistic view. Or turning it around, about 9 out of 10 of them are pluralists.

The real shocker jumping from this page is that over 60% of Born Again Christians are also pluralists. Apparently, a majority of Born Again Christians are ignorant about the basic teachings of their faith. Also, it is interesting and disturbing that the percentage of Born Again Christians who are not pluralistic is almost flat across the ages from 18 to 55. A strong majority of Born Again Christians are pluralists across that entire age range.

Who Believes Jesus is the Only Way

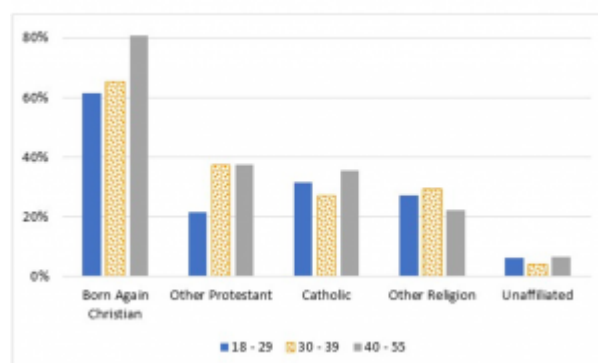
Now to narrow the question even further, we could have stated “Only Jesus taught valid ways to God.” The percentage of people strongly agreeing with this statement should be a subset of the people who disagreed strongly with the question above, “Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God.”

Instead, we asked this second question in a slightly different way but with the same intent: “I believe that the only way to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ.” We thought that this question would be

equivalent to the first one in the prior paragraph. But as we will see, people’s brains allow them to give answers that contradict each other.

Comparing this chart with the prior one, we see that Born Again Christians are at least 25 percentage points higher for this second question. And, the other Christian religious groups are higher by about 25 percentage points as well. And

Figure 6 Jesus is the Only Way to a True Relationship with God

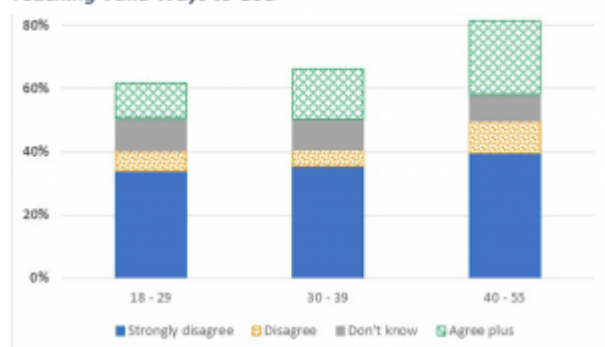


even Other Religions are up by over ten percentage points. Only the Unaffiliated drop from the first question to the second, dropping by almost half from ten percentage points down to about five percentage points.

An Inconsistent Worldview Among Many Born Again Christians

The results outlined above are disconcerting in that if the answers to the two questions were consistent, we would see Figure 6 reporting lower numbers than Figure 5 which is clearly not the case. Logically, one could say that Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus are not all valid ways to God while still saying that Jesus is not the only way to God. You could believe, for example, that Buddha is the only one who taught a valid way to God. But, if you say that Jesus is the only way to a true relationship with God, then it follows that you believe that Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus cannot all be valid ways to God.

Figure 7 What Born Again Christians Who Say Jesus is the Only True Path to God Say About Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus All Teaching Valid Ways to God



However, the survey respondents show us that one does not have to give answers which logically support one another. Even if some of the respondents misread the statement, the difference between the two is great enough that it is safe to assume that the results are not primarily

attributable to misreading.

In Figure 7, we look at what the Born Again Christians who stated that Jesus is the only way to a true relationship with God said when responding to the question about Mohammad, Buddha and Jesus. First note that the total height of each column is the same as the Born Again Christian columns in Figure 6. As shown, almost half of each column represents those who did not strongly disagree with the pluralistic view. For the youngest adults, that upper portion is about evenly

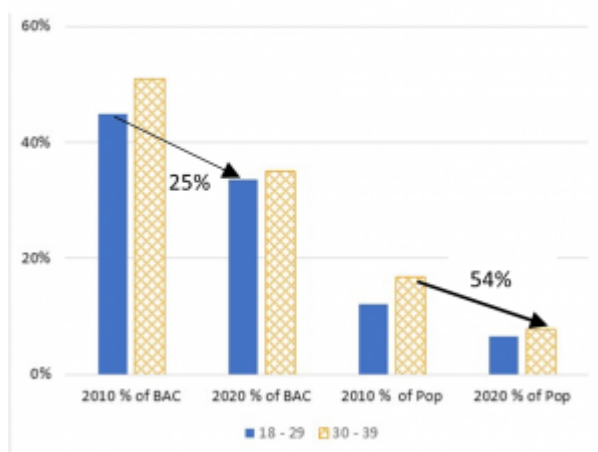
split between those who Don't Know and those who Agree or Strongly Agree that the three men taught valid ways to God. For those ages 40 through 55, we see that a significantly higher percentage affirm that all three men taught valid ways to God.

Based on these results, about one third of Born Again Christians appear to have a consistent biblical view toward pluralism. Another third appear to be totally in line with the pluralist position. The last third are those who want to say that Jesus is the only true path to God AND that Mohammad and Buddha also taught valid ways to God. In church, they may say that Jesus is the only way, but out in the world they act as if Muslims and Buddhists don't need to know this critical truth. These individuals have an incoherent worldview.

Changes over the Last Decade

How have the statistics on Born Again Christians and pluralism changed from 2010 to 2020? As shown in the figure, we see a significant drop in the percent of BACs who are not pluralists. Those age 18 to 29 drop by 25% (from 45% to 34% of all BACs) and those age 30 to 39 drop by 31% (from 51% to 35% of all BACs).

Figure 8 Born Again Christians Who Are Not Pluralists comparing 2010 with 2020

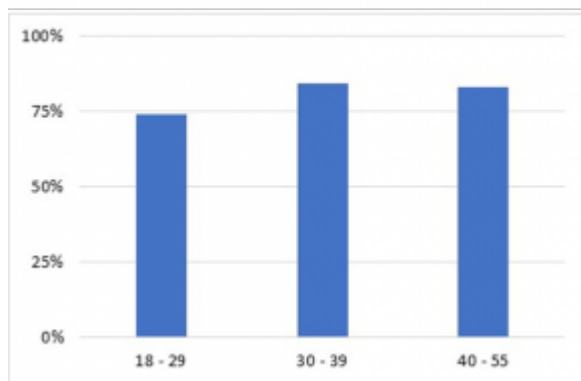


Of course, we need to remember that the percentage of BACs in the population has dropped as well. So, when we look at the percentage of Born Again Christians who are definitely not pluralists in our country the drop off is greater. As shown the number of those age 30 to 39 drops from 17% in 2010 to less than half of that number at 8% in 2020 (a drop of 54%).

Over the last decade, Born Again Christians in America have

continued to grow in the number who are pluralists.

Figure 9 Born Again Christians with a Basic



What about that smaller subset of people who have a Basic Biblical Worldview? Do a majority of them also have a pluralistic worldview? The answer is no. As shown, between 75% and 85% of them are not pluralists.

This result is not a surprise since the Basic Biblical Worldview questions do not align well with a pluralistic view. However, the result that about one in four of Born Again Christians with a Basic Biblical Worldview appear to be pluralists is unsettling.

Countering the Negative Slide

If you are reading this, you may want to do something to help reverse this trend among Born Again Christians to misunderstand who Jesus is and His unique ability to redeem us and restore into a relationship with our Creator. Here are several suggestions that can help in this reversal.

Faithful prayer. Daily pray for the lost and against the forces of darkness so visibly arrayed against them. Pray for the saved, that they may take up the true gospel and cling to the eternal truth of Jesus.

Preach, teach and speak OFTEN about the events of the cross and the tomb.

- Explain that only someone perfectly sinless could undertake the task of reconciling us before a holy God. Make sure they understand that “God made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf in order that we may become the righteousness of God in him.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

- Explain that only God, in the person of Jesus Christ, could be that sinless sacrifice. God had to undergo the pain and suffering of separating Himself from His Son on the cross. "Though he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!" Philippians 2:6-8

- Explain that the cost was so high, no other way to God is possible for sinful man. No one can come to the Father except through the Son and anyone may come through Him. "God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one intermediary between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all, revealing God's purpose at his appointed time." 1 Timothy 2:4-6

- Explain that Jesus' return is delayed only by the loving patience of God who is waiting for all to come to Jesus who will. "The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." 2 Peter 3:9

- Explain that accepting pluralism will not automatically get your non-Christian friends into heaven. Only the truth of Christ presented to them by willing lips has the power to change their eternal destiny. If you care about them, you will share with them.

It is critical that every teenager, young adult, and older adult who crosses our path needs to have these truths reiterated for them. Use different techniques and different word pictures as you strive by the power of the Holy Spirit to continually make this message clear. We know God desires to work in their life.

Notes

1. A Born Again person in our survey results is someone who 1) has made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and 2) when asked what will happen to you after you die, they answer I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.
 2. See our first article: [Introducing Probe's New Survey: Religious Views and Practices 2020](#) for a description of the biblical worldview questions used.
 3. Born Again Christians include Catholics who answered the born again questions to allow comparison with the 2010 survey, but in the Catholic category we include all Catholics including those who are born again. About 20% of Catholics affirm the two born again questions.
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Introducing Probe's New Survey: Religious Views and Practices 2020

The results are in from Probe's newest assessment of the state of biblical beliefs in America 2020, and the news is not good.

Our 2020 survey reveals a striking decline in evangelical religious beliefs and practices over the last ten years. From a biblical worldview to doctrinal beliefs and pluralism to the application of biblical teaching to sexual mores, the number of Americans applying biblical teaching to their thinking has dropped significantly over this period. Unfortunately, the greatest level of decline is found among Born Again Protestants.

Our previous survey, the 2010 *Probe Culturally Captive Christians* survey^{1}, was limited to Born Again Americans' ages 18 through 40. This survey of 817 people was focused on obtaining a deeper understanding of the beliefs and behaviors of young adult, Born Again Christian Americans.

Our new 2020 survey looks at Americans from 18 through 55 from all religious persuasions. Although still focused on looking at religious beliefs and attitudes toward cultural behaviors, we expanded the scope, surveying 3,106 Americans ages 18 through 55. Among those responses, there are 717 who are Born Again^{2}, allowing us to make meaningful comparisons with our 2010 results while also comparing the beliefs of Born Again Christians with those of other religious persuasions.

Two questions were used in both surveys to categorize people as Born Again^{3}. Those questions are:

1. Have you ever made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in your life today? **Answer: YES**
2. What best describes your belief about what will happen to you after you die? **Answer:**
I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

In our 2020 survey, we delve into what American's believe regarding biblical worldview, basic biblical doctrine, pluralism and tolerance, religious practices, applications of religious beliefs to cultural issues, and more. In this first release, we lay the groundwork by explaining the trends in religious affiliation over time using a number of different surveys. Then we look deeper, examining how many of those of each religious faith group adhered to a biblical worldview in 2010 and now in 2020.

Laying the Groundwork: American Religious Affiliations Over Time

How have the religious affiliations of American young adults changed over the years? We have examined data over the last fifty years[\[4\]](#) to answer this question. From 1972 through the early 1990's, the portion of the population affiliated with each major religious group stayed fairly constant. But since then, there have been significant changes. As an example, looking at data from the General Social Survey (GSS)[\[5\]](#) surveys of 1988, 1998, 2010, and 2018 and our 2020 Religious Views survey, we see dramatic changes as shown in Figure 1. Note that the GSS survey asks, "Have you ever had a "born again" experience?" rather than the two questions used in the Probe surveys (see above). Looking at the chart it appears that the question used in the GSS surveys is answered yes more often than the two questions used by Probe.

As shown, the most dramatic change is the increase in the percentage of those who **do not** select a Christian affiliation (i.e., Other Religion and Unaffiliated). Looking at GSS data for those age 18–29, the percentage has grown from 20% of the population in 1988 to over 45% of the population in 2018. Most of this growth is in the number of Unaffiliated (those who select Atheist, Agnostic or Nothing in Particular). In fact, those from other religious faiths[\[6\]](#) grew from 7% to 10% over this time period while **the Unaffiliated almost tripled** from 13% to 35% of the population.

The Pew Research data (not shown in the graph) shows an even greater increase, growing from 27% in 1996 to 59% in 2020. The Probe data from 2020 tracks the GSS data, supporting the overall growth trend shown in the figure.

Looking at the Unaffiliated for the 30–39 age group, we see the same growth trend growing from 9% to 30%. Comparing the 18–29 data with the 30–39 data, we can determine that more

people are transitioning to Unaffiliated as they mature. For example, we see that 26% of those in their twenties were Unaffiliated in 2010, growing to 30% of those in their thirties in 2018. This result means that more of the people in their twenties became Unaffiliated in their thirties. This result runs directly counter to the supposition of many that the growth in Unaffiliated will dissipate as young adults age and return to churches to raise their families.[\[7\]](#)

Considering the other religions shown in Figure 1, we see that the group seeing the greatest decline is Other Protestants, i.e. Protestants who did not profess to being born again. As shown, this group dropped by half (from 26% down to 13%) from 1988 to 2018. Similarly, those professing to be Catholics dropped by one quarter (from 24% to 18%) over the same time period.

In the GSS data, Born Again Protestants are remaining a relatively constant percent of the population. There has been a steady decline in those ages 18–29, but those in their thirties have not declined over this time period. This data appears to indicate that some young adults in their late twenties and early thirties are undergoing a “born again” experience.

However, while Born Again Protestants have remained stable, those who say they are affiliated with an Evangelical church have begun to decline somewhat. Pew Research surveys[\[8\]](#) of at least 10,000 American adults do show a decline in young adult Evangelicals from 28% in 2007 to 25% in 2014 to 20% in 2019.

Is a Christian Biblical Worldview Common Among Young Americans?

In assessing the worldview of people, we were not able to sit down and talk to them to fully understand their worldview. So, our 2010 and 2020 surveys include specific questions which help us identify someone with a Christian biblical worldview.

A set of four questions is used to assess what we call a Basic Biblical Worldview. Two additional questions are added to get to a fuller assessment first used by the Barna Group. We use the six questions together to assess what we call an Expanded Biblical Worldview. The questions are as follows:

Basic Biblical Worldview

1. Which of the following descriptions comes closest to what you personally believe to be true about God: **God is the all-powerful, all knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.**[\[9\]](#)
2. The Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings: **Strongly Agree**
3. If a person is generally good enough or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven: **Disagree Strongly**
4. When He lived on earth, Jesus Christ committed sins like other people: **Disagree Strongly**

Additional Beliefs for an Expanded Biblical Worldview

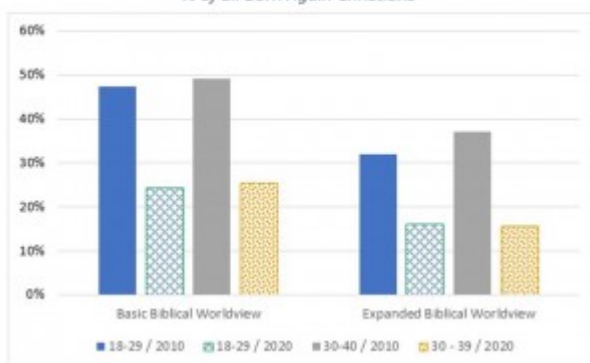
5. The devil or Satan is not a real being, but is a symbol of evil: **Disagree Strongly**
6. Some people believe there are moral truths (such as murder is always wrong) that are true for everyone, everywhere and for all time. Others believe that moral truth always depends upon circumstances. Do you believe there are moral truths that are unchanging, or does moral truth always depend upon circumstances: **There are moral truths that are true for everyone, everywhere and for all time.**

First, how do different Christian groups respond to these questions? In Figure 4, we show the percentage of each group in 2020 who have either a Basic Biblical Worldview or an Expanded Biblical Worldview. We use three groups of

affiliations: Born Again Christians, Other Protestants, and Catholics.^{10} On the left half of the chart, we indicate the percentage with a Basic Biblical Worldview by affiliation and age group. Those in the Born Again Christian group are at about 25% (about 1 out of 4) for those under the age of 40 and then jump up to 35% (about 1 out of 3) for those between 40 and 55. For those in the Other Protestant group, much less than 10% (1 out of 10) possess a Basic Biblical Worldview. Almost no Catholics possess a Basic Biblical Worldview. For both the Other Protestant group and the Catholics, the concept the vast majority do not agree with is that you cannot earn your way to heaven via good works. The other three questions are also much lower for Other Protestants and Catholics than for Born Again Christians.

Adding in the questions on Satan and absolutes for an Expanded Biblical Worldview, we see each group drop significantly. The Born Again Christian group runs about 15% below age 40 and 25% (or 1 in 4) from 40 to 55. The other two groups drop from almost none to barely any.

Figure 5 Born Again Christian Worldview Beliefs Across 10 Years
% of all Born Again Christians



Now let's compare these 2020 results with the results from our 2010 survey. Figure 5 shows the results across this decade for Born Again Christians looking at the percent who agree with the worldview answers above. As shown, there has been a dramatic drop in both the

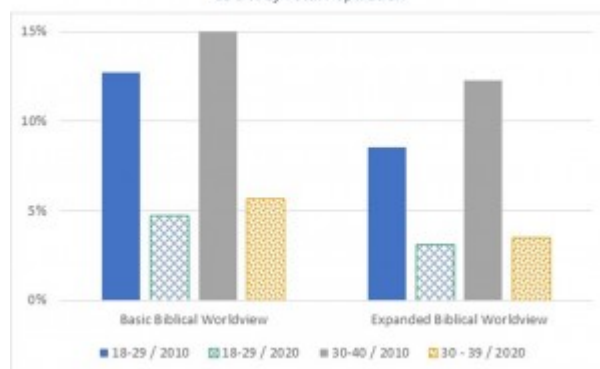
Basic Biblical Worldview and the Expanded Biblical Worldview.

If we compare the 18–29 result from 2010 with the 30–39 result from 2020 (i.e., the same age cohort 10 years later), we see a drop from 47% to 25% for the Basic Biblical Worldview and from 32% to 16% for the Expanded Biblical Worldview. **So, the percentage of Born Again Christians with a Biblical Worldview (of either type) has been cut in half over the last decade.**

This result is a startling degradation in worldview beliefs of Born Again Christians over just 10 years.

However, because the percent of the population who profess to being born again has dropped over the last ten years as well, the situation is even worse. We need to look at the percent of Americans of a particular age range who hold to a Biblical Worldview. Those results are

Figure 6 Born Again Christian Worldview Beliefs Across 10 Years as a % of Total Population



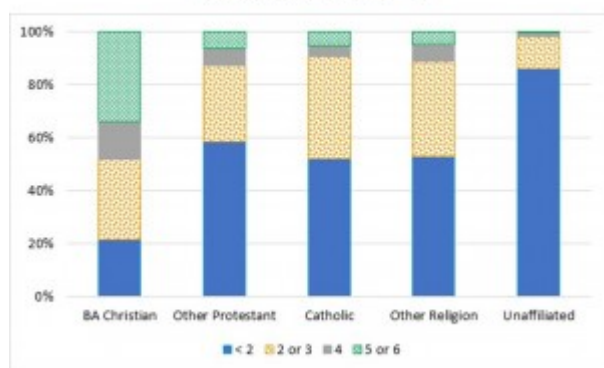
shown in Figure 6. Once again, comparing the 18–29 age group from 2010 with the same age group ten years later now 30–39, we find an even greater drop off. For the Basic Biblical Worldview, we see a drop off from 13% of the population down to 6%. For the Expanded Biblical Worldview, the decline is from 9% down to just over 3% (a drop off of two thirds).

The drop off seen over this ten-year period is more than dramatic and extremely discouraging. In 2010, we had about 10% of the population modeling an active biblical worldview. Although small, 10% of the population means that most people would know one of these committed Christians. At between 6% and 3%, the odds of impacting a significant number of Americans are certainly reduced.

However, we cannot forget that the percent of biblical worldview Christians in the Roman Empire in AD 60 was much less than 1% of the population. Three hundred years later virtually the entire empire was at least nominally Christian. If we will commit ourselves to “proclaiming the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light,”[\[11\]](#) God will bring revival to our land.

Second, how do various religious groups stack up against these questions?

Figure 7 Number of Biblical Worldview Topics Affirmed by Americans ages 18 - 39



Rather than look at the two biblical worldview levels discussed above, we will look at how many of the six biblical worldview questions they answered were consistent with a biblical worldview. In the chart, we look at 18- to 39-year-old individuals grouped by

religious affiliation and map what portion answered less than two of the questions biblically, two or three, four, or more than four (i.e., five or six).

You can see that there are three distinct patterns. First, Born Again Christians where almost half of them answered four or more questions from a biblical perspective (the top two sections of each bar). Then, we see Other Protestants, Catholics^{12}, and Other Religions^{13} chart about the same, with over half answering zero or one and very few answering more than three.

Finally, we see that the Unaffiliated have over 85% who answer zero or one. This result is one of many we have identified over the years, clearly showing that the Unaffiliated are not active Christians who do not want to affiliate with a particular group. Some have suggested this possibility, but the data does not support that hopeful concept.

Third, what do they say about God and His relationship to the world?

People have many different views of God or gods in this life. In this chart, we look at how 18-to 39-year old respondents define God across the different religious affiliations used in the prior chart. Our respondents were asked: Which of the following descriptions comes closest to what you personally believe to be true about God? They were given the following answers to choose from (without the titles).

1. **God Rules**: God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.
2. **Impersonal Force**: God refers to the total realization of personal human potential OR God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach.
3. **Deism**: God created but is no longer involved with the world today.
4. **Many gods**: There are many gods, each with their different power and authority.
5. **No God**: There is no such thing as God.
6. **Don't Know**: Don't know

Once again, the answers fall into three groups. A vast majority of Born Again Christians (~80%) believe in a creator God who is still active in the world today. It is somewhat surprising that over 20% ascribe to a different view of God. The second group consists of Other Protestants who do not claim to be born again, Catholics and Other Religions. These groups are remarkably similar in their responses with around 40% who believe in an active, creator God. So, the remaining 60% have a different view. The third group are the Unaffiliated with less than 10% professing belief in an active, creator God. Over 50% believe in no God or they just don't know. **Overall, only about one third of Americans 55 and under believe in an active, creator God.** We must admit that **America is not a Judeo-Christian nation** as the belief in God is central to Judeo-Christian views. From an evangelistic viewpoint, one needs to be prepared to explain why someone should believe in a creator God. The Probe Ministries website, www.probe.org, is an excellent place to explore the topic.^{14}

Summary

This document begins the process of understanding the status

and trends of religious beliefs and behaviors in the America of this third decade of the twenty first century. Several findings addressed above are worth highlighting in summary.

- Unaffiliated Americans continue their growth toward one half of the population which began before the turn of this century. The current number of young adults (under the age of 40) who are **unaffiliated ranges between one third and one half of our population.**
- The percentage of young adult Americans who claim to be Born Again Protestants has declined slightly among the youngest group (18–29) but has remained fairly constant during this century.
- Other Protestants and Catholics have seen marked declines during this century. The percentage of **young adult Other Protestants has dropped by one half** (from about one quarter of the population to about one eighth) since 1988.
- Born Again Christians are the only group to have a significant number of adherents who profess to having a Basic Biblical Worldview. This worldview is measured by the answers to four very basic questions at the heart of Christian doctrine. Even among this group, **only about one in four (25%) of them hold to a Basic Biblical Worldview.**
- Over the last ten years, the number of young adult (18–39) Born Again Christians with **a Basic Biblical Worldview has dropped by two thirds** from almost 15% of the population down to about 5%. This is a remarkable and devastating drop in one decade.
- Just under one half of Born Again Christians agree with more than three of the six worldview questions. Amongst other Christian groups and the population as a whole less than one in ten do so.
- **Overall, only about one third of Americans 55 and under**

believe in an active, creator God.

In our next release, we will look at how American young adults

- react to the doctrine of Jesus Christ,
- believe that Jesus is the only path to heaven, and
- have a classic view of tolerance.

In the meantime, be in prayer about what you can do in your sphere of influence to stem the trends listed above.

Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of the outcomes of our 2010 survey and other surveys from that decade, go to our book [*Cultural Captives: The Beliefs and Behavior of American Young Adults*](#).
2. The 717 respondents equated to 747 equivalent people when weighted to adjust for differences between those surveyed and the distribution of gender, ethnicity, ages, and location as given by the United States Census Bureau.
3. Our 2010 survey was facilitated by the Barna Group and I would presume they commonly use these two questions in other surveys to identify born again Christians.
4. We have looked at religious affiliation from Pew Research, GSS, PALS, Barna Group and others.
5. General Social Survey data was downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the National Opinion Research Center.
6. Note that the Other Religions category includes Christian cults (e.g. Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses), Jews, and other world religions.
7. In future releases, we will also see that the Unaffiliated are very unlikely to hold to basic Christian beliefs.
8. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014, Religious Knowledge Survey 2019 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for

the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

9. Other answers to select from: God created but is no longer involved with the world today; God refers to the total realization of personal human potential; there are many gods, each with their different power and authority; God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach; there is no such thing as God; and don't know.

10. Born Again Christians include Catholics who answered the born again questions to allow comparison with the 2010 survey but in the Catholic category we include all Catholics including those who are born again.

11. 1 Peter 2:9

12. Catholics here include about 20% who profess to be born again. That subset is included in both the BA Christian column and the Catholic column in Figure 7 and Figure 8.

13. One of the reasons that Other Religions include some that answer more than three worldview questions is that Mormons and other Christian cults are included in that category.

14. Articles on our website addressing this topic include [Evidence for God's Existence](#), [There is a God](#), [Does God Exist: A Christian Argument from Non-biblical Sources](#), [The Impotence of Darwinism](#), [Darwinism: A Teetering House of Cards](#), and many others.

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Are Surveys Fake News?



On March 7, 2019, Probe's Senior VP Steve Cable gave a one-hour presentation drawing on his decades of statistical research and insight to probe deeply into the trustworthiness of news containing references to surveys. In this message he shows why we should remain skeptical of what surveys purportedly indicate. Sometimes the actual results are directly opposite of what is claimed.

You can download the mp3 audio recording [here](#).

Pew Research on Religious Beliefs of American Christians

Looking across the seven-year period from 2007 to 2014, we find that the percentage of Evangelicals holding a biblical worldview is continuing to decline, and the percentage of Mainline and Catholics holding such a worldview is declining at an even higher rate.

Overall, 13.3% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 27 held a biblical worldview in 2007. By 2014, for the same segment of

Americans who are now between the ages of 25 and 34, this number had dropped to 11.5%.

In this post, I continue my exploration of the two large surveys by Pew Research entitled U. S. Religious Landscape Surveys, taken seven years apart (i.e., 2007{1}] and 2014{2}). In prior posts, I looked at [the growing number of Nothing at All respondents](#) and at [the breakdown of Americans by religious affiliation{3}](#). Now, I want to look more deeply at the religious beliefs of Evangelicals and Other Christians (i.e., Mainline Protestants and Catholics).

Using these surveys, we can look at five key questions on religious beliefs. The first four questions we will call Basic Doctrine. The questions are:

1. Do you believe in God or a universal spirit? *Absolutely or fairly certain.* Which comes closest to your view of God? *God is a person with whom people can have a relationship and is not an impersonal force.*
2. Which comes closest to your view: The Bible is the word of God. (versus the Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God.)
3. Do you think there is a heaven, where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded? Yes.
4. Do you think there is a hell, where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished? Yes.

Clearly these questions do not express Evangelical doctrine perfectly, but they are worded the way that Pew Research chose to express them and I can't go back and fine tune them.

The fifth question is:

5. When it comes to questions of right and wrong, which of the following do you look to most for guidance? Religious teachings and beliefs{4}

We will refer to all five questions combined as a Biblical Worldview (BWV).

Let's begin by looking at Evangelicals. In Table 1, the percentages of each age group for both survey years are tabulated.

Table 1 – Christian Beliefs for Evangelicals

Evangelical (All)					
Survey	2007 Survey		2014 Survey		
Age Range	18 – 27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
Basic Doctrine	59.1%	56.2%	61.1%	53.1%	57.6%
Biblical Worldview	33.6%	33.6%	36.2%	31.7%	39.5%

Note: Those 18-27 in 2007 would be 25-34 in 2014, which is why 2014 is broken up differently than 2007

And we see that the youngest group in each survey tends to be slightly higher the older respondents in most areas. In 2014, we see a significant dip for those 25 to 34 years of age versus those younger and those older. It also appears that there is a slight uptick in both basic doctrine and BWV belief in 2014 over 2007. However, we need to look at the percentage of the entire age group to get the full picture.

Table 2 – Percentage of an Entire Age Group for Christian Beliefs of Evangelicals

Evangelical (All)					
Survey	2007 Survey		2014 Survey		
Age Range	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
% of All People in Age Group	28.0%	32.7%	23.8%	26.5%	32.9%
Basic Doctrine	16.6%	18.4%	14.6%	14.1%	19.0%
Biblical Worldview	9.4%	11.0%	8.6%	8.4%	13.0%

Now we see that against the entire population, the percentage of those in 2014 with a Basic Doctrinal view and a Biblical

Worldview and younger than 35 is less than the 18–27 year-olds from 2007. They went from higher in Table 1 to lower in Table 2 because of the fairly significant decrease in the percentage of Evangelicals in those age groups. In fact, comparing 18-27 in 2007 with 25-34 in 2014, we find the number affirming Basic Doctrine goes down by 15% and the number affirming a Pew Biblical Worldview goes down 10%.

When you think about it, the results from these two tables are what you would expect to see. Those who were marginal Evangelicals in 2007 were more likely than those with stronger Evangelical beliefs to identify as something other than an Evangelical by 2014. This action would make the percentages in Table 1 go up in 2014. But there was still some reduction in the number of people who believed in Basic Doctrine and a Biblical Worldview in 2014. Thus, the percentages in Table 2 went down a significant amount.

Now let's see how Other Christians (i.e. Non-Evangelicals) compare.

Table 3 – Christian Beliefs for Other Christians

Other Christians (Mainline and Catholic)					
Survey	2007 Survey		2014 Survey		
Age Range	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
Basic Doctrine	32.8%	30.6%	39.0%	30.5%	32.8%
Biblical Worldview	10.5%	11.6%	14.5%	11.1%	16.1%

Comparing Table 3 with Table 1, we see that the percentage of Other Christians holding a Basic Doctrine is just over one half of the rate with Evangelicals. For a Biblical Worldview, it drops to about one third of the rate expressed by Evangelicals. Given that these respondents self-identified with a Mainline Protestant or Catholic denomination, it is disheartening to see that only around 10% of them ascribe to a Biblical Worldview.

Table 4 – Percentage of an Entire Age Group for Christian

Beliefs of Other Christians

Other Christian					
Survey	2007 Survey		2014 Survey		
Age Group	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
% of All People in Age Group	36.9%	46.0%	29.5%	28.3%	41.3%
Basic Doctrine	12.1%	14.1%	11.5%	8.7%	13.5%
BWV	3.9%	5.4%	4.3%	3.1%	6.6%

Once again, we see a similar effect when we look at the population as a whole. Given the significant drop in the number of people identifying as Other Christians in 2014 when compared with 2007, we see a large drop (as a percentage) in those professing a Basic Doctrine and a Biblical Worldview. In fact, comparing 18-27 in 2007 with 25-34 in 2014, we find the number affirming Basic Doctrine goes down by 30% and the number affirming a Pew Biblical Worldview goes down 20%. Perhaps more importantly, we see only about 3–4% of the population under 35 are Mainline/Catholics with a Biblical Worldview.

Impact of Pluralism on a Christian Biblical Worldview

Surprisingly, it appears to be possible to have a pluralistic view (i.e. there are multiple ways to heaven) and have a Biblical Worldview as defined by the questions in the two Pew surveys. Let's look at the relationship between these two important views. In an earlier blog post, [Measuring Pluralism: A Needed Correction](#), we looked at the number of people who did not take a pluralistic view. In fact, they said,

1. My religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life. OR
2. Many religions can lead to eternal life, but only Christian religions can lead to eternal life. (That is: Many Christian religions can lead to eternal life.)

As reported in the earlier post, those who stated either of the items above were as shown below:

Table 5 – Christians Who Are Not Pluralistic

	Evangelical			Other Christian		
Age Range	18-24	25-34	35 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
Not Pluralistic	60%	54%	59%	27%	27%	25%

What we want to consider in this post is the relationship between one's view of pluralism and one's view of basic Christian doctrine.

Table 6 – Probability of Holding Christian Doctrine Given One's View on Pluralism

	Evangelical			Other Christian		
Age Range	18-24	25-34	35 plus	18-24	15-34	35 plus
One True with Basic Doctrine	72.9%	65.3%	66.8%	56.3%	50.5%	52.3%
Pluralist with Basic Doctrine	43.8%	38.6%	44.6%	32.6%	23.2%	26.3%
One True with Biblical Worldview	47.8%	45.1%	50.4%	27.9%	25.3%	30.7%
Pluralist with BWV	19.0%	16.0%	23.9%	9.5%	5.9%	11.2%
Note: One True = Not Pluralistic						

First, let's look at the impact of pluralism on belief in Basic Doctrine as defined above. For Evangelicals who are not pluralistic, we can see that about two out of three hold to the Basic Doctrine. For Other Christians, it drops to about one in two (or 50%). For Evangelicals who are pluralistic we see a drop down to about 40% across all ages. For Other Christians, the drop is down to around 25% which is only half of the percentage of those who are not pluralistic.

However, when we add in the idea of making decisions on what is right or wrong, we see a significant drop. For Evangelicals

who are not pluralistic, about one in two (50%) hold to this Biblical Worldview, a drop of about 30%. For Other Christians, we see an even larger drop down to about half of the level for a Basic Doctrine, i.e. down to about 25%.

We see an even greater reduction in comparing those who are pluralistic with those who are not. For Evangelicals, they are about a third as likely (e.g., 16% compared to 45% for those age 25-34) to hold to a Biblical Worldview. For Other Christians, generally less than 10% of those with a pluralistic view hold to a Biblical Worldview, or less than one third of the rate among those who are not pluralistic.

It is most disturbing, but unfortunately true that the percentage of Evangelicals holding a biblical worldview is continuing to decline, and the percentage of Mainline and Catholics holding such a worldview is declining at an even faster rate. This does not bode well for the future of the church of Jesus Christ in America.

Notes

1. **The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.
2. The **U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.
3. **Religious Affiliation of American Emerging Adults: 1996 to 2014**

4. Other choices were Philosophy and reason, Practical experience and common sense, and Scientific information

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Measuring Pluralism: A Difficult Task

Steve Cable examines the data concerning American Christians' beliefs about pluralism, the belief that all religions are true and valid ways to know about God, the world, and salvation.

We are in the process of examining two related Pew Research surveys taken by about 35,000 people, once in 2007[[1](#)] and again in 2014[[2](#)]. In today's post we want to consider the question of religious pluralism among American Christians. As there are different views concerning the meaning of "religious pluralism," for this post we will use this definition: *Pluralism is basically the belief that the various world religions are true and equally valid in their communication of the truth about God, the world, and salvation.* I.e., there are multiple religious beliefs and practices which will suffice to get one to heaven. It does not mean that all religions are sufficient, but that more than one distinctly different religious concept will result in eternal salvation.

In their 2007 survey, Pew had one question dealing with pluralism:

Which of these two statements comes closer to your own views even if neither is exactly right?

1. My religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life.

[OR]

2. Many religions can lead to eternal life

The responses to this question for Evangelical Christians and for Non-Evangelical Christians{3} are given in the table below.

Table 1 – Percent of Respondents Who Said “My Religion is the One, True Faith”

Age Range	18 – 27	30 plus
Evangelical	44.6%	36.4%
Non-Evangelical Christian	19.0%	14.2%

Not surprisingly, the percentage of Evangelicals who selected statement #1 far exceed the percentage of Non-Evangelical Christians.

However, it is disappointing that significantly fewer than one half of Evangelicals would select that statement. And it is surprising that the younger cohort is much more likely than the older cohort to make such a statement.

Which brings up the question: When someone says “my religion is the one,” are they referring to Christianity vs. other major religions, OR are they referring to their denomination vs. other Christian denominations? One would guess that many Christians, especially from older generations, may be thinking about the latter.

In fact, the Pew Research organization realized this issue almost immediately after releasing the results of the 2007 survey. They did another smaller survey in 2008{4} to get insight into this question and reported:

One of the most frequently asked questions to arise from the 2007 Landscape Survey findings is how the 70% of religiously affiliated respondents who said “many religions can lead to eternal life” interpreted the phrase “many religions.” For example, do Christians who express this view have in mind only

Christians from denominations other than their own, or are they thinking more broadly of non-Christian religions? To shed light on this issue, the new survey asks those who believe that many religions can lead to eternal life a series of follow-up questions . . . nearly three-quarters (72%) of evangelicals who say many religions can lead to salvation name at least one non-Christian faith that can do so.[\[5\]](#)

Turning this around, they found that 28% of evangelicals who said that many religions can lead to eternal life were only talking about other Christian religions. Thus, this group of evangelicals would not be considered pluralistic. So, I analyzed the data from this 2008 survey and used those results to calculate data of Christians' views on pluralism as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – Results from 2008 Religion and Public Life Survey

Age Range		18 – 27	30 plus
Evangelical	One True Faith	64%	49%
	Only Christians in Heaven [6]	74%	61%
Non-Evangelical Christian	One True Faith	24%	16%
	Only Christians in Heaven	37%	22%

So we can see that adding these people who were pluralistic only among different Christian faiths, we add another ten percent or so to those Christians who are not pluralistic. However, this 2008 data introduces another issue. Those who said their religion was the one, true faith appears to have increased by almost 20 percentage points for Evangelicals under 28 (from 45% to 64%). I don't believe this is possible given the lack of events in 2008 to account for such a significant, sudden change. However, the Pew report comments

on it this way, “. . . the number of people saying theirs is the one, true faith that can lead to eternal life increased slightly between 2007 and 2008, from 24% to 29%. The increase is especially pronounced for white evangelical Protestants, among whom the figure rose from 37% to 49%.”[\[7\]](#)

In the 2014 Religious Landscape survey, the ambiguity was resolved by asking two questions:

1. The question asked in the 2007 survey listed above, and
- 2. ASK IF CHRISTIAN AND SAY “MANY RELIGIONS”** to prior question: And do you think it’s only Christian religions that can lead to eternal life, or can some non-Christian religions also lead to eternal life?

- a) Only Christian religions can lead to eternal life
- b) Some non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life

We can then compare the results from both Religious Landscape surveys as shown in table 3 below:

Table 3 – Comparing 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Results with Estimates for Shaded Areas

	Evangelical					Non-Evangelical Christian				
Year Surveyed	2007		2014			2007		2014		
Age Range	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus	
My religion is one, true faith	45%	36%	52%	42%	39%	19%	14%	23%	19%	15%
Only Christians in heaven	55% [8]	50%	60%	54%	59%	32%	20%	27%	27%	25%

Note: the numbers for 2007 Only Christians in heaven are

estimates and could be off significantly.

And the results from the 2008 Religion and Public Life with the 2014 Religious Landscape survey as shown in table 4:

Table 4 – Comparing 2008 Religion and Public Life Survey with 2014 Religious Landscape Survey

	Evangelical					Non-Evangelical Christian				
Year Surveyed	2008		2014			2008		2014		
Age Range	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus	18-27	30 plus	18-24	25-34	35 plus
My religion is one, true faith	64%	49%	52%	42%	39%	24%	16%	23%	19%	15%
Only Christians in heaven	74%	61%	60%	54%	59%	37%	22%	27%	27%	25%

I think the important things to note from the two tables are:

1) Adding those who said “Many religions can lead to eternal life but non-Christian religions cannot” to those who said “My religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life.” we see an increase of between 8 and 20 percentage points;

2) The increased percentages in 2014 also even out the results from across age groups. For example, for Evangelicals you can see a swing of 13 percentage points from the 18 to 24 age group compared to the 35 plus age group on the “one, true faith” response. But, when you look at “only Christians in heaven,” you see the swing across age groups has dropped to 1 percentage point. Apparently, the youngest adults are less likely to be thinking only of their denomination when they answered the first question with “My religion . . .”

3) Finally, there is a slight drop off in Evangelicals who are not pluralists between 2007 and 2014.

As this somewhat tortuous journey through the subject of pluralism exploring three different surveys clearly shows, it is hard to nail down what people are thinking when asked about pluralism. The primary takeaway is that slightly less than one out of two Evangelicals (~40%) have a pluralistic view, while three out of four Non-evangelical Christians have such a view. An Evangelical with a pluralistic viewpoint has no reason to be concerned with evangelism and technically is not an Evangelical. In a subsequent post, we will examine the difference in worldview beliefs between non-pluralist Evangelicals and pluralist Evangelicals

Notes

1. **The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

2. **The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

3. Consists of Mainline Protestant Denominations, Catholics, and some Historically Black Denominations.

4. **Pew Research, Religion and Public Life Survey 2008**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data

Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

5. Pew Research, **Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life**, December 18, 2008

6. This factor was determined by looking at the people who answered the first question: “Many religions can lead to eternal life” but in answering subsequent questions said Islam, Hinduism, Atheism and No Religious Faith cannot achieve eternal life. When they answered the first question with “many religions”, they obviously were referring to many Christian religions (or possibly Christian and Jewish religions). I did not include the subsequent question about the “Jewish religion” because the Bible is clear that many OT Jews will be in heaven.

7. Perhaps the candidacy of Barack Obama triggered this decrease in pluralism for white evangelical Protestants. If it did, its effect had dissipated by the 2014 survey with results much closer to the 2007 survey than the 2008 survey. I think it was probably the result of surveying cell phone users as well as landlines in 2008.

8. This number is estimated by taking the number for One, True Faith and adding the percentage of those Christians in the 2008 survey who said that many religions could lead to eternal life but not Islam, Hinduism, atheism, and No Religious Faith.

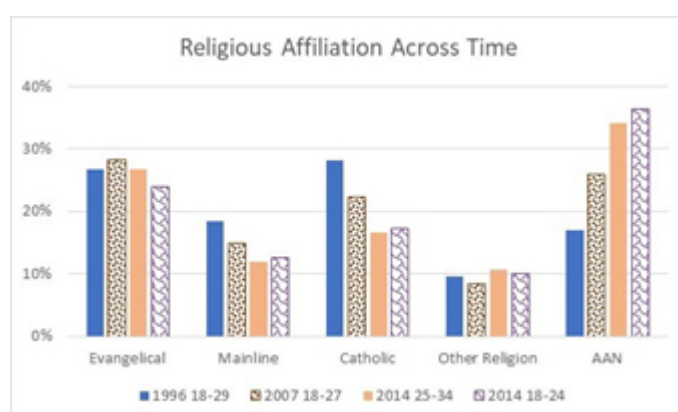
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Religious Affiliation of American Emerging Adults:

1996 to 2014

In my past few posts, I have been focusing on data from the monumental surveys taken by Pew Research in 2007^{1} and 2014^{2}. These surveys of about 35,000 Americans allow us to get more accurate data on American beliefs and drill down with greater confidence into specific subsets of Americans (e.g. emerging adults, Asian-Americans, those with advanced degrees). The earlier posts focused on the Nones and their increased role in American society. In this post, we will consider the general religious makeup of American emerging adults. In subsequent posts, we will look at their religious beliefs, religious practice and their cultural beliefs.

The Pew surveys parse religious affiliation down to specific denominations. In this post, I have combined those into five categories: Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Other Religions, and Atheists/Agnostics/Nothing in Particular (the Nones). The Pew surveys list Historically Black Churches as a separate group. I used the technique described in the footnote below^{3} to assign the different historically black denominations to Evangelical or Mainline Protestant.



In the figure to the right, I have shown how the denominational categories split up the population in 1996, 2007 and 2014. Data from the 1996 survey by Pew on Religion and Politics^{4} was added to provide a better understanding of

the trends in religious affiliation among young adults.

As shown, both Mainline and Catholic denominations have decreased significantly over this period. Mainline denominations have decreased from 18.5% down to 12.0%, or by almost a third. During the same time period, Catholics have reduced from 28% to about 17%, a reduction of almost 40%. By 2014, almost half (46%) of young adult Catholics were Hispanic. At the same time, only about 37% of emerging adult Hispanics (18–29) reported being affiliated with a Catholic church as compared to over 55% of those Hispanics over 40. Seven years earlier, in 2007, well over half (55%) of emerging adult Hispanics reported being affiliated with the Catholic Church, highlighting a dramatic drop by 2014. So, we find this interesting mix of trends:

- the percentage of Catholics is greatly reduced,
- young Hispanics are significantly less likely to be Catholics than in the past,
- but still almost half of young Catholics are Hispanic.

In contrast, the Atheists, Agnostics and Nothing in Particulars (Nones) have more than doubled, going from 17% of the young adult population up to about 36% in 2014, as discussed in an earlier post.

Over the same period, those selecting to affiliate with an Evangelical denomination and those affiliating with another religion (e.g. Mormon, Muslim, Hindu) have remained relatively constant.

The data from these surveys shows that the results reported in my book, *Cultural Captives*, from 2010 are continuing at an alarming pace. Those results indicate that the Nones will soon constitute the majority of emerging adults in America largely at the expense of Mainline Protestants and Catholics. Although declining at a slower pace than other Christian denominations, Evangelicals are showing a steady decline as well.

Notes

1. The **U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

2. The **U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

3. **Historically Black denominations affiliated with Evangelicals**: All Baptists except for Progressive Baptists, Nondenominational blacks, Pentecostals, and Holiness Family

Historically Black denominations affiliated with Mainline Protestants: Progressive Baptists, Methodists, non-specific Protestants

4. **Religion and Politics Survey 1996**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

Religious Beliefs and Advanced Degrees

Steve Cable examines how people with advanced degrees match up to the populations as a whole in their denominational affiliation and basic religious beliefs.

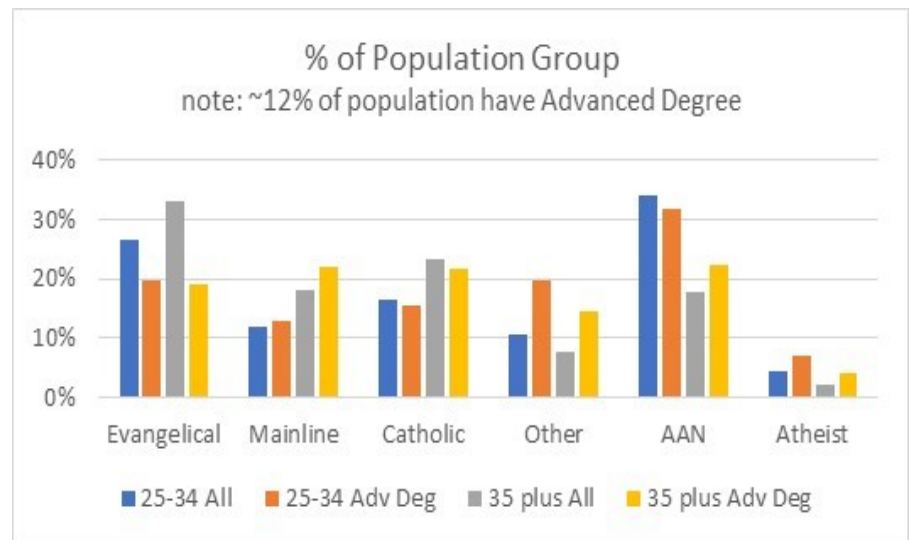
Religious Beliefs and Advanced Degrees

A colleague asked me, “Do you have any recent research—insights—into the religious beliefs of professors?” After some deep digging, I was surprised to see that advanced degrees may not change basic religious views like many believe they do.

The simple answer is no. I have not found any survey data that I can access that focuses on college professors. However, since the question was asked, I wanted to look at the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study which surveyed 35,072 Americans to see if I could extract any data that would provide any insight into the religious beliefs of professors. Unfortunately, there are no employment questions in the survey and the level of education question does not separate Ph.D.s from master’s degrees.

However, I did get some interesting information about the highest level of education asked about in the survey: *What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received? Postgraduate or professional degree, including master’s, doctorate, medical or law degree (e.g., M.A., M.S., Ph.D., M.D., J.D., graduate school).* I wanted to see how religious affiliation and religious beliefs compared with the population as a whole; i.e., did having a graduate degree make one more or less likely to be religious?

First let's look at their self-proclaimed religious affiliation as shown in the figure below. The color key shows age range and cohort (i.e., representing all survey takers or only ones with advanced degrees or "Adv Deg").



We find (somewhat surprisingly, I think) that an advanced degree does not significantly change the distribution of religious affiliations. To read the figure, compare the blue bars with the red bars and the gray bars with the yellow bars. Some things to note:

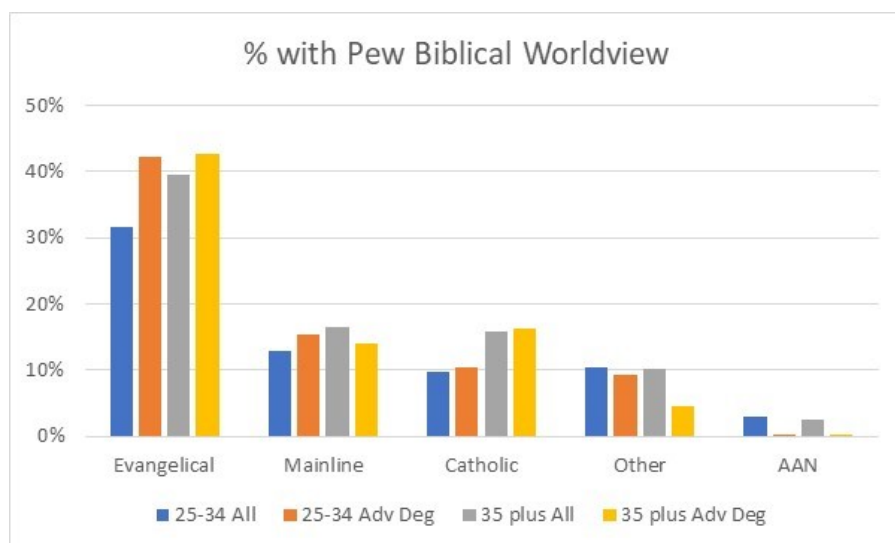
- Since there are very few people under the age of 25 with doctoral degrees, I looked at those 25 to 34 and those 35 and above
- AAN stands for Atheist, Agnostic, or Nothing at All
- The sum across each color for the first five categories adds up to 100%, i.e. for all 25 to 34 year olds, 27% are evangelicals, 12% are mainline, 16% are Catholic, etc. adding up to 100% of the population.
- Atheists are a subset of AAN and were added for their relevance to the question.

First, note that for Mainline Protestants, Catholics and AAN's, those with advanced degrees are essentially identical in percentage as the age group as a whole. Only for Evangelicals and Other Religions is there a significant difference. Those respondents with advanced degrees are a significantly smaller segment of the population for Evangelicals and a significantly larger segment for Other Religions. It is not surprising to find that a greater

percentage of those with advanced degrees are followers of a non-Christian religion than for the population of non-Christians as a whole. This result is because a great portion of immigrants to the U.S. with a Hindu or Muslim background are professionals with advanced degrees brought in to fill engineering and computer science positions.

It is interesting that for AAN's, those with advanced degrees are about the same percentage of the population as those without advanced degrees.

What about their religious beliefs? These are compared in the figure shown here.



A Biblical Worldview as defined by Pew Research questions is one that holds the following positions^[1]:

- God is a personal being with whom people can have a relationship
- Our holy book is the word of God
- There is a heaven, where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded
- There is a hell, where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished
- When it comes to questions of right and wrong, I look to religious teachings and beliefs most for guidance

The primary take-away from the chart is once again the striking similarity between the religious group as a whole and the religious group comprised of those holding advanced

degrees.

It is interesting to note that Evangelicals with advanced degrees are somewhat more likely than Evangelicals as a whole to ascribe to the Pew version of a Biblical Worldview. Remembering that the first chart shows a drop-off in the percentage of Evangelicals with advanced degrees relative to the overall percentage of Evangelicals in the population gives us a reasonable clue as to the cause: perhaps those people who completed their advanced degree and still considered themselves Evangelicals were more conscious of what that means than the population at large.

I thought you might be interested in this data. However, it really sheds little light on the questions about college professors because college professors are a small percentage of the pool of people with advanced degrees in America. One study that does provide data on this question was done in 2006 by two professors.[\[2\]](#) It appears to be a well-done attempt to look specifically at college professors. It supports the view that many college professors (particularly at top-tier universities) are not supporters of and in many case actively ridicule evangelical religious thought. Note: "many college professors" does not mean a majority but rather a significant minority large enough that one could not spend four years at a university without spending semesters in several of their classes. It would be nice if there were a similar study from 2016 so we could see the trends between 2006 and 2016.

In summary, looking at recent survey results, we do not find a significant difference in the percentage of people who self-identify as Atheist, Agnostic, or Nothing at All who have an advanced degree relative to those without an advanced degree. However, there is a significant fall off in the percentage of Americans with advanced degrees who identify as Evangelicals. At the same time, those with advanced degrees who affiliate themselves with an Evangelical denomination are more likely to hold a biblical worldview than those without advanced degrees.

[1] These five positions have some wording issues from an evangelical perspective, but Pew selected the possible answers and these five come as close as possible within their question structure to reflecting a partial biblical worldview.

[2] Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, *How Religious are America's College and University Professors?*, SSRC, Feb. 6, 2007

Changing Religious Affiliations from Childhood to Young Adulthood

As we have seen in [previous blogs](#), the percentage of young adults who identify as Nones has been increasing rapidly over the last two decades. During the same time, Christian groups have seen a decline in the percentage of young adults who identify with them. But looking back at their childhood affiliations, we want to know 1) Where did these Nones come from and 2) Did any who grew up in a None household become Christians.

Looking at the Pew Research, **U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**[\[1\]](#), we can answer these questions and others about the transition from childhood faith to adult faith.

In the first part of this post, we will consider Americans who were 25 to 34 years old in 2014. This age group is of interest because they represent those from post-college through the beginning of child rearing and because we can compare them with 18 to 24-year-olds from the 2007 Pew Research survey.

The two tables below look at the change from two different

perspectives. The first looks at where young adults with a particular religious affiliation came from as children. The second looks at where children of a particular religious affiliation ended up as young adults.

Let's consider a simple example to understand the difference between these two tables. Assume that there were 200 Evangelicals and 200 Nones in 2014 and there were 100 Evangelicals and 300 Nones among the same group as children. Finally, assume that there were 25 people who were Nones as children who became Evangelical as an adult. That tells us that 125 Evangelical children became Nones as an adult.

Given this data, the first table would be:

	Evangelical Adult	None Adult
Evangelical as Children	75%(75/100)	41.7% (125/300)
None as Children	25% (25/100)	58.3% (175/300)
Total	100%	100%

And the second table would be:

Example 2: Religion Children Became as Adults

	Evangelical Adult	None Adult	Total
Evangelical as Children	37.5% (75/200)	62.5% (125/200)	100%
None as Children	12.5% (25/200)	87.5% (175/200)	100%

With that as background, let's look at our two tables.

Table 1: Religion 25 to 34-year-old Adults Came From as Children

Religion as a Child	Evangelical	Mainline	Black	Catholic	Other	None	Change	% Leaving
Evangelical-C	62.7%	19.2%	6.2%	1.5%	5.4%	16.0%	98.1%	38.4%
Mainline-C	10.5%	53.0%	2.4%	1.9%	8.2%	17.7%	69.1%	63.4%

Black-C	3.8%	2.1%	73.5%	1.0%	3.4%	5.4%	77.3%	43.2%
Catholic-C	13.5%	13.7%	6.5%	92.6%	10.3%	27.1%	54.6%	49.4%
Other-C	1.7%	2.9%	3.1%	0.5%	65.4%	11.1%	91.3%	40.3%
None-C	7.7%	9.1%	8.4%	2.5%	7.4%	22.7%	280.8%	36.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		
Evangelical-C stands for “Evangelical as a child” and so on								

Table 2: Religion Children Ended Up Affiliating with as 25 to 34-year-old Adults

Religion as a child	Evangelical	Mainline	Black	Catholic	Other	None	Total
Evangelical-C	61.6%	9.0%	1.7%	1.1%	2.6%	24.1%	100%
Mainline-C	15.2%	36.6%	0.9%	2.2%	5.7%	39.4%	100%
Black-C	10.6%	2.8%	56.8%	2.1%	4.5%	23.2%	100%
Catholic-C	9.8%	4.7%	1.3%	50.6%	3.6%	30.1%	100%
Other-C	3.2%	2.6%	1.6%	0.7%	59.7%	32.3%	100%
None-C	14.2%	8.0%	4.2%	3.5%	6.5%	63.7%	100%
Evangelical-C stands for “Evangelical as a child” and so on							

First, let's consider the Nones.

Looking at Table 1, we see that the greatest percentage of Nones were affiliated with the Catholic church as children (27.1%) while a smaller percentage were actually Nones as children (22.7%). But lest we think this is only a Catholic issue, we find almost 34% (16.0% + 17.7%) of them were affiliated with a Protestant church as children.

From Table 2, we see that almost 40% of Mainline Protestant children became Nones by the time they were 25 to 34-year-olds. Shockingly, more Mainline Protestant children became Nones than stayed affiliated with a Mainline denomination (39.4% to 36.6%). Strikingly, every other religious grouping lost at least one in four of their childhood affiliates to the

Nones; with Catholics and Other Religions losing about one out of three. It is important to highlight that one out of four children raised as Evangelicals chose to be characterized as a None as young adults. Even though that percentage is smaller than other religious groups, one of four is still a significant percentage.

Now let's look at the columns in Table 1 labeled Change and % Leaving. For this age group, there are almost three times as many Nones as adults as there were as children (i.e. 280.8%). Comparing it with other religious groups, we see that all other groups fell in size. Interestingly, over one third of those who were Nones as children are now affiliated with another religious group. But that group is overwhelmed by the number becoming Nones from other groups.

What about Evangelicals, Mainlines and Catholics?

From Table 1, we see that two-thirds of adult evangelicals age 25 to 34 were evangelical as children. Most of the remaining one third came from either Catholic (13.5%) or Mainline (10.5%) backgrounds. However, looking at Table 2, we note that 14% of those who selected None as children were affiliated with an Evangelical church as young adults. This group makes up only 8% of the Evangelical young adults because the Evangelicals are a larger group than the Nones were as children.

The group that **lost almost two-thirds of childhood affiliates is Mainline** Christian churches. From Table 2, we see that almost 40% of them became Nones and another 15% became Evangelical. Looking at the Change column for Table 1, we note that the number of Mainlines is down to less than two-thirds of the number who affiliated with Mainline churches as children.

However, the Catholics do even worse. The Change column shows that the **number of young adult Catholics is barely one half** of

the number who said they were affiliated with a Catholic church as children. The Mainlines do a little better because they picked up a significant number of Evangelical and Catholic children while the Catholic faith picks up very few from any other religion (compare Table 1 the column labeled Mainline with the column labeled Catholic to see this difference).

Conclusion

The vast majority of young adult Nones are not raised in households directly promoting that viewpoint. In fact, only 23% of young adult Nones said they were Nones as children. Clearly, the teaching of the culture at large and the lack of a compelling argument from their families is causing the other 77% of young adult Nones to leave their childhood faith to embrace nothing at all.

Relative to their childhood affiliation, the number of Nones is exploding among American young adults. If we, as Evangelicals in America, want to change this trend we need to be equipping our teenagers and emerging adults with a deep understanding of why we know the gospel of Jesus Christ is true and worth giving your life in service to. I encourage you to check out Probe's Periscope material at upPeriscope.com as a good place to start the process

.

Note

1. **The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014**, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

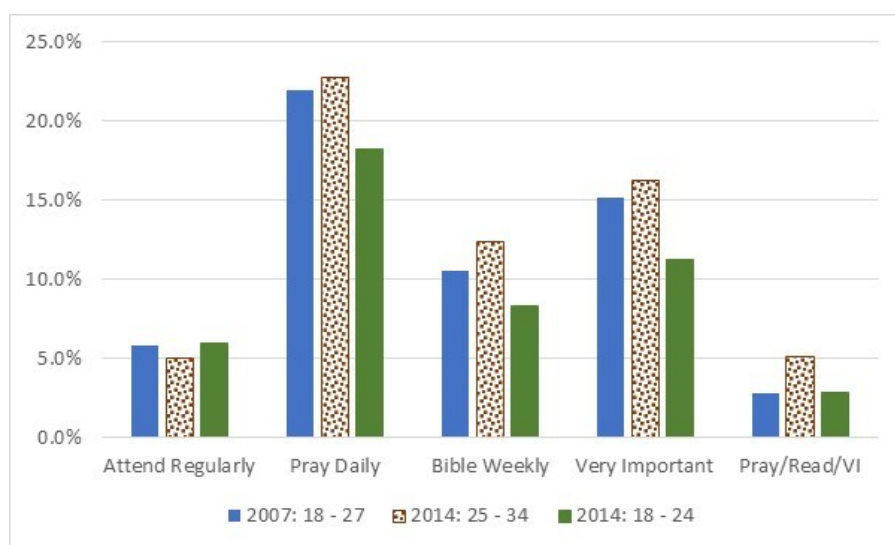
Nones: Are Not Mostly Christians Who Are Unaffiliated

Steve Cable determines that 'Nothing in Particulars' are not actually practicing Christians who just don't want to affiliate with a particular denomination.

[Earlier we examined](#) the significant increase in Nones (those who said their religious affiliation was atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular), which grew from 25% of young adults in 2007 to over 35% of young adults in 2014 according to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey taken by Pew Research.[\[1\]](#) In this post, we will examine the level of involvement in religious practices that these Nones, and particularly the Nothing in Particulars, reported in response to the survey questions. We will try to answer the question: "Are these Nothing in Particulars actually Christians who do not feel comfortable announcing an affiliation with a particular religious group?"

First, let's consider the religious practices of the Nothing in Particulars. In Figure 1, we see their commitment to some common behaviors of nominal and committed

Christians. The actual questions are:



1. Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services? [Monthly or more]
2. People practice their religion in different ways. Outside of attending religious services, do you pray? [At least once per day]
3. Read scripture outside of religious services [At least weekly]
4. How important is religion in your life? [Very important]
5. Pray daily and read scripture weekly and consider religion very important in your life.

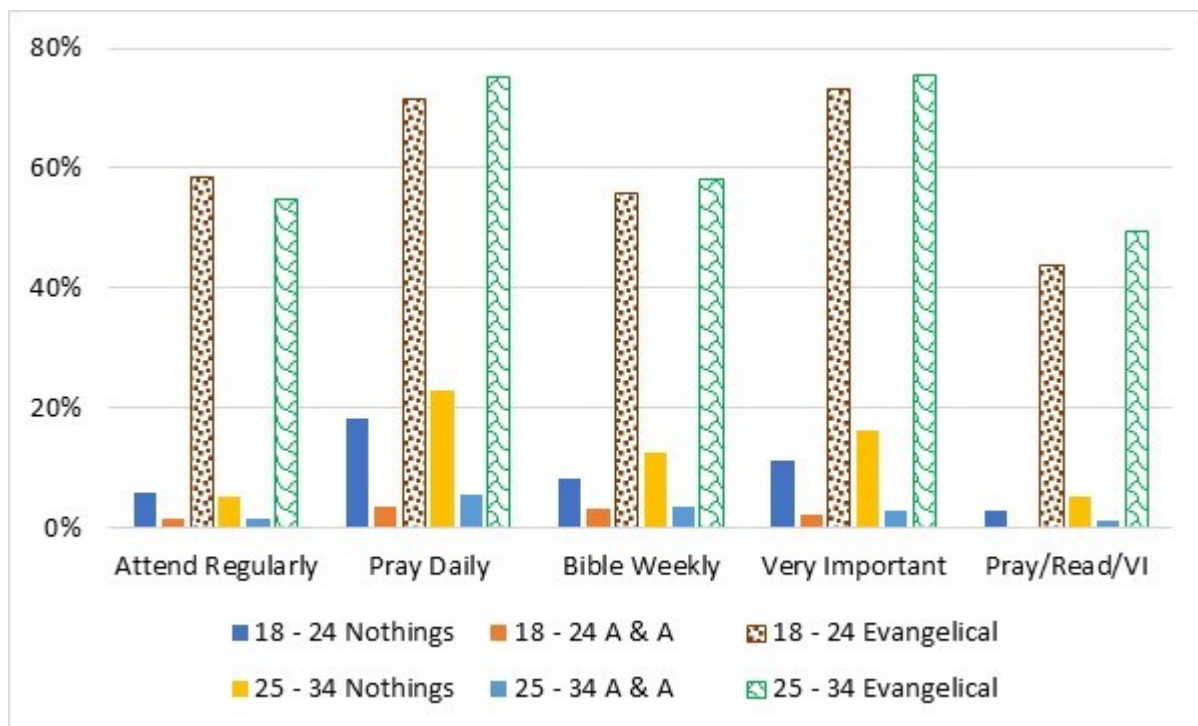
As shown, the figure looks at the answers to these questions for three different groups:

1. Those responding in 2007 who were 18 through 27 years of age
2. Those responding in 2014 who were 25 through 34 years of age (the age range corresponding to those 18 through 27 in 2007)
3. Those responding in 2014 who were 18 through 24 years of age

As you can see, about one in five pray at least daily, about one in ten read the Bible at least once a week, about one in twenty attend church at least once a month. And only about three out of one hundred pray, read the Bible and consider religion to be a very important part of their life.

Note that the corresponding age groups across the two survey dates have roughly the same percentage of respondents who participate in these practices, but the youngest group lags their elders in praying, Bible reading, and attitude toward religion.

How do these levels relate to the responses from Evangelicals on



the one hand and from Atheists and Agnostics on the other hand? Figure 2 gives us the answer to this question.

First let's orient ourselves to the data. The first and fourth column of each group correspond to the second and third column of each group in Figure 1, i.e. 18–24s and 25–34s from 2014. The second and fifth column of each group are the responses from Atheists and Agnostics. As you can see, they are lower than those for the Nothing in Particulars in every category. But more importantly, those results for Evangelical young adults in both age categories (columns three and six) are much, much higher than those for Nothing in Particulars and Atheists and Agnostics.

For example, looking at reading the Bible at least once a week, we find about one in ten Nothing in Particulars, about one in thirty-five Atheists and Agnostics, and almost six out of ten Evangelicals.

Looking at the combination of prayer, Bible reading, and considering religion a very important part of life, we find about one out of twenty-five Nothing in Particulars, about one in one hundred Atheists and Agnostics, and almost five out of ten Evangelicals.

Clearly in this area of religious practice the Nothing in Particulars appear to be much closer in their practice to those who profess Atheism or Agnosticism than those who are Evangelical.

The data clearly does not support the notion that the Nothing in Particulars are actually practicing Christians who just do not want to affiliate with a particular denomination. In fact, the vast majority of Nothing in Particulars have no regular activity associated with worshipping God. Perhaps they believe in Christianity even though they don't attempt to practice it. We will consider that possibility in our next blog post.

Note

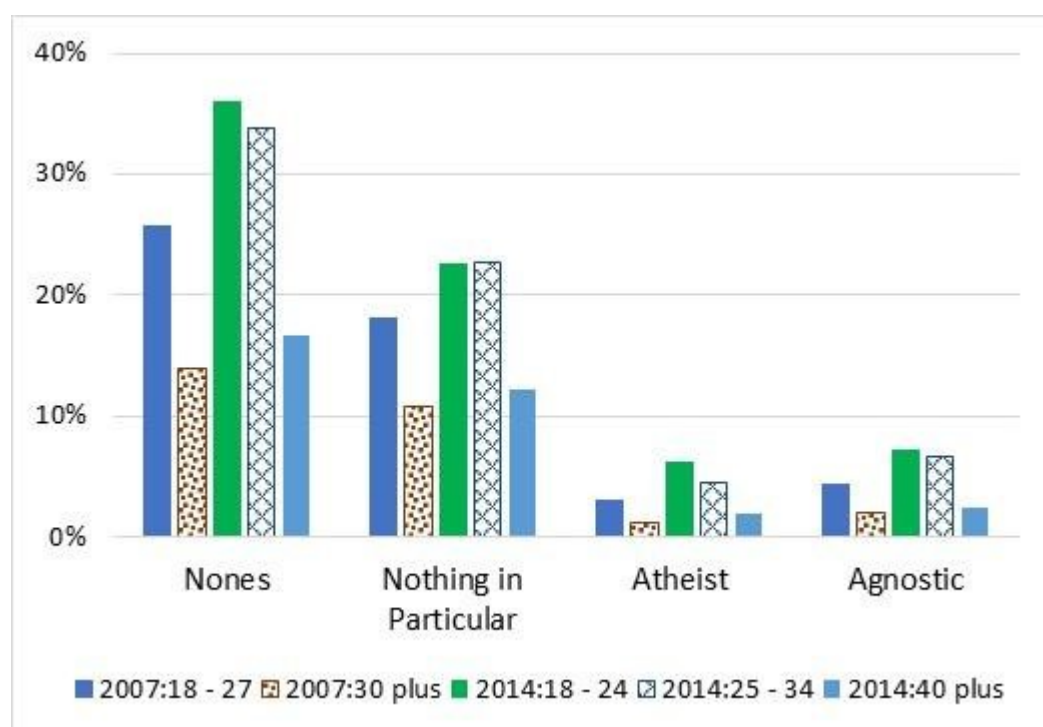
{1} The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007 and 2014, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

Update on Nones: Continuing to Dominate the Developing American Religious Scene

Steve Cable provides an update on those with no affiliation with religious traditions. It appears that soon, the majority of American emerging adults will identify as something other than a Christian.

Pew Research has done a great service to those who want to understand the current trends of religious beliefs in America. In 2007, they interviewed about 35,000 Americans to create the 2007 American Religious Landscape Study [{1}](#). Then in 2014, they interviewed a similar size group of Americans using many of the same questions (along with a few new or different questions) to create the 2014 American Religious Landscape Study [{2}](#). Most surveys of this nature include 1,000 to 3,000 respondents which limits their accuracy when considering subsets of the data by age, religious preference, education, ethnicity, etc. By collecting responses from such a large number of people, we can look at these subsets with a much greater level of confidence.

I want to begin by updating our understanding of the dominant religious trend in America this century: the so-called rise of the Nones [{3}](#). The Nones are those people who choose not to affiliate with any religious tradition. In the Pew survey, Nones include atheists, agnostics, and “nothing in particular” respondents. We can understand how this phenomenon is growing by examining the results shown in Figure 1. People were asked “What is your present religion, if any?”



In Figure 1, the first group of bars reflects the percentage of Nones at different times (i.e. 2007 and 2014) and for different age segments. The first two bars show the percentage of Nones in 2007 for those between 18 and 27, and for those 30 years and older. As shown, over 25% of Americans under the age of 28 selected a None category. For those 30 and older, only 14% selected a None category. This was a tremendous growth over the levels up to the early 1990's when the GSS survey^[4] reported 11% of those under 30 and 7% of those 30 and over.

But this amazing growth in Nones is far from over, as shown in the last three bars in the first group summarizing the response in 2014. As shown, the youngest group (ages 18 – 24) showed 36% selecting a None category. The group from 25 to 34 selected None at almost the same rate, 34%. This age group would have been 18 to 27 in 2007 when about 25% of them selected None. Over this seven-year period almost 10% of that age group switched from some other religion to None.

Some people suggest that these young adults will return to church as they begin raising children. What does the data say? Looking at a slightly older group, I compared those 23 to 32 in 2007 with those 30 to 39 in 2014. What I found follows the same trend: 23% of those in 2007 were Nones while 27% of those in 2014 were Nones. Even those over forty increased to 17% from 14%, a significant growth over the level only seven years earlier for those age 30 plus at the time. Thus, we see no trend of emerging adult Nones turning into church attending, Christians as they age in fact just the opposite. More of them are becoming Nones as they move towards middle age

The next three sets of bars break the Nones up into the three constituencies: Nothing in Particular, Atheist and Agnostic. About two thirds of Nones identify as Nothing in Particular with the remainder about evenly split between Atheist and Agnostic.

In my next post, we will see what these Nones believe about

basic Christian doctrine and if they have a somewhat active spiritual life. And in later post, we will also look to see what religions these Nones identified with as children.

For now, our bottom line takeaway is that more than 46% of emerging adults (ages 18 through 29) identify with either another religion (10%) or None (36%), meaning that in a few short years **the majority of American emerging adults will identify as something other than a Christian**. If this trend concerns you, please take a look at our church-wide and small group study called Periscope. Periscope is targeted to address issues taking today's believer captive and blunting their witness to the world around them. For more information, go to www.upPeriscope.com.

1. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

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3. Stephen Cable, *The Rise of the Nones*, November 6, 2016, probe.org/the-rise-of-the-nones-reaching-the-lost-in-todays-america/

4. General Social Survey 1990, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and

were collected by the James Davis, Tom Smith and Peter Marsden.

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