Religious Trends Over the Last Decade

Probe VP Steve Cable examines some of the findings of the Probe Survey 2020: The Changing Face of Christianity in America.

Religious Trends Over the Last Fifty Years

In late 2020, Probe administered a new survey{1} to over 3,000 Americans ages 18 through 55 as a follow up to our 2010 survey{2}. Comparing these two surveys reveals a striking decline in Christian religious beliefs and practice across America over the last decade. Before focusing on these changes, let's begin with a foundational question.

How have young adult religious affiliations changed over the last five decades?



As documented in the General Social Surveys{3} from 1970 through 1990, their religious affiliations remained fairly constant. Since then, there have been significant changes.

The most dramatic change is found in young adults under thirty who select a non-Christian affiliation. This group grew from about one fifth of the population in 1990 to almost half today. Those non-Christians from other religious faiths{4} such as Judaism, Islam, and Mormonism, grew slightly up to about 10% of the U.S. young adult population. At the same time, **the Unaffiliated (i.e. Atheist, Agnostic or Nothing in Particular) almost tripled** to over a third of the population. Among the Unaffiliated, the Nothing in Particular category had by far the largest growth. The Pew Research surveys show an

even greater increase, growing from 27% in 1996 to 59% in 2020.

Now bringing in the data from GSS 2010 survey, we learn 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 people in their twenties became Unaffiliated in their thirties. This result runs directly counter to the supposition of many that the growth in Unaffiliated would dissipate as young adults age and return to churches to raise their families.

Conversely, **Christian groups declined** with Other Protestants{5} dropping by half, from about one in four down to less than one in eight young adult Americans. Catholics also experienced major losses, dropping by one quarter down to less than one in five young adult Americans over this thirty-year period.

Although less affected, the Evangelical affiliation also experienced a drop in recent years. GSS reported a small decline in young adult, born again Protestants, from about one in four down to around one in five Americans. Pew Research{6} reported a steeper decline in young adult Evangelicals, from 28% in 2007 down to 20% in 2019.

Perhaps this decline is a winnowing out of those whose Christian beliefs are not vital to their lives. In which case, a greater percentage of born again Christians should hold a strong biblical worldview now in 2020 than in 2010. In the next section, we will explore this topic to find out the truth of the matter.

Born Again Young Adults and a Biblical Worldview

In the next sections, we will be focusing on Born Again

Christians in our Probe results. A Born Again Christian is someone who says:

1. I have made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important in my life today and
2. I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

We can compare the responses of Born Again Christians to those of Other Protestants and Catholics.

What portion of these three groups have a Basic Biblical Worldview strongly affirming that:

1. God is the all-powerful, all knowing, perfect creator who rules the world today.{7}
2. The Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings.
3. A person cannot be good enough to earn a place in heaven.
4. While on earth, Jesus committed no sins like other people do.

All four concepts above are key components of God's redemptive plan. For example, Jesus being sinless made it possible for his death to redeem us.{8} Or, if the Bible is inaccurate in some of its teachings how could we know that it is correct in teaching about redemption?

In 2020 for those ages 18 through 39, one of four Born Again Christians, one of twenty Other Protestants and one of one hundred Catholics affirmed all four of these foundational beliefs. The statement least likely to be affirmed by all three groups was "a person cannot earn a place in heaven". Perhaps many have been influenced by the current postmodern thinking that what's not true for you can be true for someone else.

Only Born Again Christians had a sizable minority of one fourth affirming this worldview. In contrast, nearly half of Born Again Christians affirmed it in 2010. Clearly, this last

decade had a serious impact on the perception of what it means to be a Christian.

We see a similar drop when comparing those ages 18 to 29 in 2010 with the same cohort now 30 to 39 in 2020, once again belying the notion that young adults will return to a conservative faith in their thirties. Instead of a noticeable increase as the cohort aged, we see a sizeable drop in those who affirm these key Christian doctrinal statements.

As the percent of true Christians drops, the ability to reach out with the gospel is surely reduced. However, Christians in the Roman Empire in AD 60 were an even smaller portion. Three hundred years later virtually the entire empire was nominally Christian. If we "proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light{9}," God will bring many to repentance.

Born Again Young Adults and Pluralism

Pluralism is the belief that there are multiple ways to be right with God. **Pluralism and Christianity are not compatible**. Jesus clearly stated, "*No one comes to the Father except through me*."{10} The
high price paid through Jesus' life and death excludes the possibility of Jesus being one of several options. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "*There is salvation in no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved*."{11}

What does Probe's new survey reveal about pluralism? Confronted with the statement, "Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God," how did American Christians respond? Do they align with clear biblical teaching by strongly disagreeing? For those ages 18 through 39, we found that about one third of Born Again Christians, one in eight Other Protestants, and one in twenty Catholics did so. An overwhelming majority of Christians chose to accept a belief

that devalues the death and resurrection of our Lord. Once again, only Born Again Christians had a sizeable minority of one third who agreed with Jesus and the New Testament.

Looking back to 2010, was there a significant change among Born Again Christians during this decade? For the same age group, the percent in 2010 strongly disagreeing was almost one half, compared to the one third in 2020. So, more Christians than ever have no reason to share their faith with people of other religions. As the need for evangelism increases, the number of Christians who believe evangelism is even needed by people of other religions decreases.

The age group 18 to 29 saw 45% choosing a non-pluralist view in 2010 with that same age cohort (now 30 to 39) dropping to 35% in 2020. Once again, we see that as Born Again Christians are maturing, more of them are abandoning rather than clinging to the strong truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To counter this slide with the young adults we know, please:

1. Pray for the Lord to send laborers into the harvest, opening their to the infinite value of the gospel.

2. Explain that the chasm is so great only God can make a way of reconciliation. As Paul wrote, "*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, Jesus . . . who gave himself as a ransom for all . . .*"
{12}

3. Explain that your accepting pluralism will not get your non-Christian friends into heaven. Only the truth of Christ presented to them by willing lips has power over their eternal destiny.

Young Adults and Jesus Our Savior

Probe's new survey shows that professing to be born again does not equate to orthodox biblical beliefs. In this section, we will see this borne out in beliefs about Jesus Christ.

First, why did Jesus die on a cross? The Bible is clear Jesus chose the cross**. "He did it to redeem us by taking our sins and our punishment upon Himself."** Close to nine out of ten 18- to 39-year-old, Born Again Protestants selected this answer.{13} All Christian leaders should want their people to know Jesus' role in their redemption, even those with a works-based gospel. Yet less than two thirds of Other Protestants and Catholics selected that answer.

Many said either the Jewish or Romans leaders caused Jesus' death. But Christians should know that prior attempts by those groups were supernaturally thwarted.

Second, "Jesus will return to this earth to save those who await his coming."

This statement comes from scripture, " *. . . so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, . . . to save those eagerly waiting for him*."{14} As you can see, this verse answers both questions. The apostle Paul wrote, "*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven . . . and the dead in Christ will rise first*."{15}

Around two thirds of Born Again Protestants strongly agree that Jesus will return to save. Apparently, the remaining third are not sure.

For other Christian groups, only about one third of them strongly agreed.

The third question is: "When he lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people."

The Bible clearly states, "*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*."{16} God laid our sins upon Jesus in his earthly death. If Jesus were a sinner like you and I, His death would have been for His own sin.

Once again, about one third of Born Again Protestants did not select Disagree Strongly. Having this large group who don't understand biblical Christianity is disappointing.

Young adult Born Again Protestants drop down to about one half when looking at **all three questions together**. It appears the other half are trusting Jesus to save them, without a good understanding of who Jesus is. All other Christian groups drop to one in ten or less professing these truths about Jesus.

Finally, we find nine out of ten people with a Basic Biblical Worldview also select a biblical answer for the three Jesus questions. This shows a strong correlation between a Basic Biblical Worldview and an understanding of Jesus' purpose.

Are the Unaffiliated Uncommitted Christians?

In this section we will access Probe's 2020 survey to learn about those identifying as Agnostic or Nothing in Particular. We will call them AGNIPS. Perhaps, as some have suggested, a significant percentage are really Christians not affiliated with any denomination.

Among those ages 18 through 39, one in five are AGNIPS. About one third of these were Protestants as children but only three out of one hundred profess to being born again. So, it appears unlikely that any significant portion of the AGNIPS are latent Born Again Christians.

Of course, many people professing to be Christians do not qualify as Born Again. So perhaps many AGNIPS are latent Other

Protestants or Catholics. Let's look at three different metrics to see if this proposition is supported by data.

First, look at a nominal level of religious activity: pray at least daily and read your Bible at least weekly. I think anyone not doing these has little interest in their faith. For this young adult segment, 35% of Born Again Christians and almost 30% of Other Protestants and Catholics *but* less than 5% of AGNIPS perform these activities. Compared to professing Christians, the AGNIPS have very few doing these activities.

Looking only at AGNIPS who were affiliated with a Protestant faith as a child, we find only 3% performing these activities.

A second metric: how about those who believe God is creator and active in the world and do not believe good works will get them into heaven? We find: 33% Born Again Christians, 4% Other Protestants and Catholics, around 0.5% of all AGNIPS and only 0.4% of AGNIPS with a childhood Protestant affiliation.

Finally, of those who strongly agrees with the statement, "I believe that the only path to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ." Once again: 64% of Born Again Christians, 28% of Other Protestants and Catholics, 5% of all AGNIPS and 5% of AGNIPS with a childhood Protestant affiliation.

All of these metrics agree that very few young adults who are Agnostics or Nothing in Particular appear to have latent Christian beliefs. Even those who were affiliated with a Protestant church as a child did not have a higher level of affiliation with Christian beliefs.

Over this last decade, among Born Again Christians, a basic biblical worldview and understanding of Jesus is decreasing while pluralism is increasing. And the growing AGNIP population is far removed from Christian thought. Those who follow Christ, must respond by speaking the truth about Christ in our churches, our neighborhoods, and the world. We cannot

expect any of these groups to just come back to a solid Christian belief. We must reach out to them.

Notes

1. 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 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.
2. Our previous survey, the 2010 Probe Culturally Captive Christians survey, was limited to Born Again American's ages 18 through 40. This survey of 817 people was focused on a obtaining a deeper understanding of the beliefs and behaviors of young adult, Born Again Christian Americans. 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
3. 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.
4. Note that the Other Religions category includes Christian cults (e.g. Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses), Jews, and other world religions.
5. Protestants who did not profess to being born again
6. 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.
7. 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.
- Don’t know

8. See for example 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15
9. 1 Peter 2:9
10. John 14:6
11. Acts 4:12
12. 1 Timothy 2:4-6
13. Other answers included:

- He threatened the Roman authority’s control over Israel.
- He threatened the stature of the Jewish leaders of the day.
- He never died on a cross.
- He failed in his mission to convert the Jewish people into believers.

14. Hebrews 9:27-28 ESV
15. 1 Thessalonians 4:16
16. 2 Corinthians 5:21 NET

©2023 Probe Ministries

Defending Theism: A Response

to Hume, Russell, and Dawkins

T.S. Weaver looks at anti-God arguments from three prominent philosophers, showing why belief is God is more reasonable than their objections to His existence.

Theism, broadly defined, is the belief in the existence of a supreme being or other deities. Believers in Jesus Christ would say we follow Christian Theism, believing in and trusting the one true God who has revealed Himself through His word and through His Son Jesus. In pursuit of the defense of theism and answering profound antagonists to the faith, I will engage with some of the objections raised by three prominent thinkers: David Hume, Bertrand Russell, and Richard Dawkins.

David Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who is often considered the best philosopher to have written in the English language. Although he was wary of metaphysical things like God, he was very fascinated by religion. He is widely considered to be an atheist, but we do not know for certain whether he was atheist [one who denies that God exists], agnostic [one who is not sure if God exists], or deist [one who believes God created the universe but then let it run according to natural laws without divine intervention] by the time of his death. Regardless, his more prominent work is *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. In it he presents classical challenges to theism.

The strongest challenge to theism Hume presents in *Dialogues* is the problem of evil and God's moral nature. His view is that with the amount of evil in the world, we cannot consider God as morally sensible, morally great, and powerful. His assumption is that if God were to exist, He does not care to solve the problem of good and evil. While this is the toughest intellectual challenge a theist has to answer, I believe there

is an answer.

When God created, He gave humans the ability to make free decisions. If this ability were denied, our love (the supreme ethic) for Him would not be a choice and thus coerced. As a result, it would not be real love. Church Father Augustine (354-430) commented on this in his book *On the Free Choice of the Will*, by arguing that free will is what makes us human. God made us that way so we could freely choose to venerate, trust, and follow Him. So built into love, veneration, trust, and obedience was the ability to make free decisions. Consequently, certain choices are going to be terrible or evil (e.g., Adam and Eve's disastrous disobedience in the Garden of Eden). As a result, the only way to eradicate evil is to eradicate free will. Hence, evil is merely the consequence of the free will of humanity. John Stackhouse rearticulates this case:

> God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of "compulsion," is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used *not* to enjoy God's love and to love God in return, but to go one's own way in defiance of both God and one's own best interest. This is what the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden portrays.{1}

It is not that God is insensitive to evil (Proverbs 6:16, 15:26; Psalm 5:4), but that moral and natural evils are the cause of the sin (free choice to disobey God) of man.

Bertrand Russell

Shifting gears, Bertrand Russell, (1872-1970) a famed agnostic philosopher, argued against theism with a famous view that

everything on this globe is the result of "an accidental collocation of atoms."{2} Thus, there is no real aim for which we were produced. I believe this view is both incredibly depressing and incredibly wrong. If one were to take what Timothy Keller would call a "clue of God" like beauty and think this through, it would have serious implications. If this were true, as Keller put it in *The Reason for God,* "Beauty is nothing but a neurological hardwired response to particular data."{3} Conductor Leonard Bernstein once spoke of the effect of the beauty of Beethoven's music:

> Our boy has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.{4}

Does that sound like a "neurological hardwired response to particular data"? Or is Beethoven's music beautiful? As a seminary student, I often yearn for an excellent night of sleep. The thought is beautiful to me. Augustine in his *Confessions* argued that yearnings like this were clues to the existence of God. While my tiredness does not prove that my desire for an excellent night of sleep will happen tonight, it is correct that native yearnings like this link to actual substances that can fill them. For example, sensual yearning (linking to sex), hunger (linking to food), tiredness (linking to sleep), and interpersonal yearning (linking to relationship). We have a desire for joy, love, and beauty that no quantity or condition of sex, food, sleep, and relationship can satisfy. We hope for something that nothing on this globe can satisfy. Do you think this is a clue? I assert this unpleasing yearning is a deep-rooted native longing that is an undeniable clue not only for the existence of God, but also that God is the only one who can satisfy that yearning. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity,* "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most

probable explanation is that I was made for another world."{5} (Please also see Dr. Michael Gleghorn's article "C.S. Lewis and the Riddle of Joy" at probe.org/c-s-lewis-and-the-riddle-of-joy/) Tying all this back to Russell's famous view, it makes sense that if there were a God who can satisfy that kind of yearning, this God likely made us, not by accident, but with a purpose. That is worth investigating.

Richard Dawkins

Now I turn to Richard Dawkins (1941-), who I think is best described as a militant atheist scientist. He writes in his book *The God Delusion*, describing God:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.{6}

Tell us how you really feel, Dawkins. Although there is a lot said here, what is most obvious is his portrayal of God as immoral because of what God displayed of Himself in the Old Testament. These acts are perceived to undermine his morally perfect nature. Although this will not be my main response, I want to highlight that for Dawkins to grumble that God has perpetrated immoral acts, he acknowledges there is an objective moral law. In a separate argument, I could go from here to make the case that for there to be an objective moral law there must be an objective moral law giver (God). However, I instead want to concentrate on "the God of the Old Testament."

The Old Testament passage found in Deuteronomy (7:1-5; 20:16-18) tends to be the most cited in an argument against God such as Dawkins's quote above. In this passage, God

instructed the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites living in a specific region: "[T]hen you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy" (7:2), and "[D]o not leave alive anything that breathes" (20:16). This passage bothers many (including myself) and may be an example of where Dawkins got his characterization. It is understandable to wonder how a good and loving God could instruct this.

To make sense of a tough passage like this one must understand the context, starting with who God is. God is not like any earthly ruler. He's not like Trump. He's not like Biden. He is Creator of all things and King of the Universe. That said, He supplies life, and He can take life when He chooses, however He chooses. The next step is to think through whether His instruction was justified (as if it were up to us to define justice). There are occasions when we as humans may feel it is justified for people to take another's life, as in self-defense, to safeguard others, or in a just war. What we must understand about the Canaanites in this passage is that this was not some illogical imperative for them to be murdered. The Canaanites were malevolent. In their obscene paganism, they were spiritually dangerous. They were unspeakably wicked. God said to the Israelites, "It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; *but on account of the wickedness of these nations*" (emphasis mine) (Deuteronomy 9:5).

The worst example of their wickedness is child sacrifice. Apologist Timothy Fox informs us, "They would burn their children alive in a fiery furnace as a sacrifice to the god Molech. Just that one act alone would be justification for their complete annihilation."{7} I wonder what Hume, who raised the problem of evil, would have to say to Dawkins about God dealing with and judging evil. One of the explanations God provided for wrecking the Canaanites was so that Israel would not embrace their malevolent ways. Dawkins may still object though and say, "What about the kids? How could a loving God

instruct the Israelites to destroy harmless kids?" I do find this troubling as well, but as shown above, God can take life when He chooses, however He chooses. No one is promised a lengthy, peaceable life and to perish of old age. Furthermore, what if God saw that if these children were to mature, they would be just as evil and corrupt as their parents? What if ordering the death of children infected by their parents' wickedness is similar to an oncology surgeon cutting out small cancer cells along with the full-grown cells? That is a possibility. In addition, God does not appreciate the murder of the evil but patiently waits for repentance of sins (Ezekiel 18:23). In the case of the Canaanites, we see He will only allow wickedness for so long though.

Another objection Dawkins has to the existence of God is science. His view is that you can either be scientific and sensible, or religious. He is either ignoring, or ignorant of, the fact that modern science arose out of a biblical worldview. Christians are responsible for developing the scientific perspective and method. Francis Bacon, astronomers Kepler and Galileo, and the brilliant mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton all believed in God. They all helped shape the development of modern science; they believed that since God was a God of order, they expected nature to be orderly. They also understood that one man's opinion could be faulty because of sin, and therefore others needed to verify what any one scientist said. Kepler even characterized his scientific perspective as "thinking God's thoughts after Him."

Dawkins thinks God and science do not mix. Yet two legendary experiments performed in 1916 and 1997 reveal this view is not as widely held as Dawkins and others make it seem. In 1916, American psychologist James Leuba conducted a study asking scientists if they believed in a God who actively communicates with humanity, no less than via prayer. 40 percent confirmed they did, 40 percent confirmed they did not, and 20 percent were not confident either way. Edward Larson and Larry Witham

duplicated this study in 1997 using identical queries with scientists. They discovered the figures had not altered substantially. Even atheist philosopher Thomas Nagle disagrees with Dawkins's view of reality. Nagle even questions whether atheist naturalists think their moral instincts (yes morality has come up again), for example the belief that genocide is morally incorrect, are true instead of just the consequence of neurochemistry hardwired into humans. He writes:

> The reductionist project usually tries to reclaim some of the originally excluded aspects of the world, by analyzing them in physical—that is, behavioral or neurophysiological—terms; but it denies reality to what cannot be so reduced. I believe the project is doomed—that conscious experience, thought, value, and so forth are not illusions, even though they cannot be identified with physical facts.{8}

Science *cannot* explain all and *can* be consistent with religious faith. Therefore, it is unreasonable to think that an individual can only be a believer of science *or* a believer of God. It is also irrational to believe we came into the world by accident, or that because of the presence of evil in the world theism is not workable. In short, it is more reasonable to believe in theism than not to.

Notes

1. J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 552.
2. Bertrand Russell, "The Free Man's Worship," The Independent Review 1 (Dec 1903), 415-24 Title of essay changed after 1910 to "A Free Man's Worship."
3. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 138.
4. From Leonard Bernstein's "The Joy of Music" (Simon and Schuster, 2004), 105.

5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity,* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 105.
6. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006), 51.
7. crossexamined.org/god-behaving-badly-destruction-canaanites/, accessed March 31, 2022.
8. Thomas Nagel, "The Fear of Religion," The New Republic (October 23, 2006).

Bibliography

Bernstein, Leonard. "The Joy of Music," (New York: Simon and Schuster), 2004.

Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God*. (New York: Penguin Books), 2016.

Moreland, J.P. and Craig, William Lane. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press), 2003.

Nagel, Thomas. "The Fear of Religion," *The New Republic*, October 23, 2006.

Ross, Allen P. "Genesis" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985.

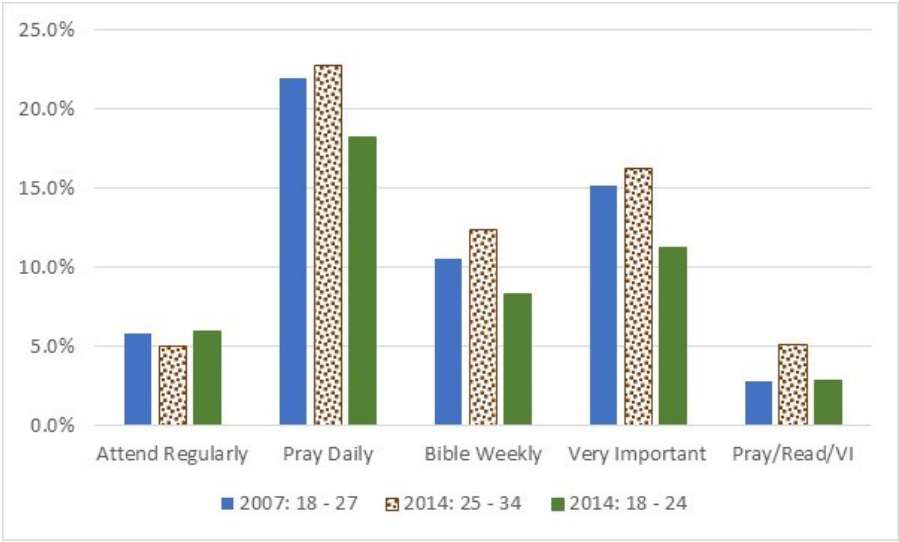
Russell, Bertrand "The Free Man's Worship," *The Independent Review*. 1. Dec 1903.

©2022 Probe Ministries

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.

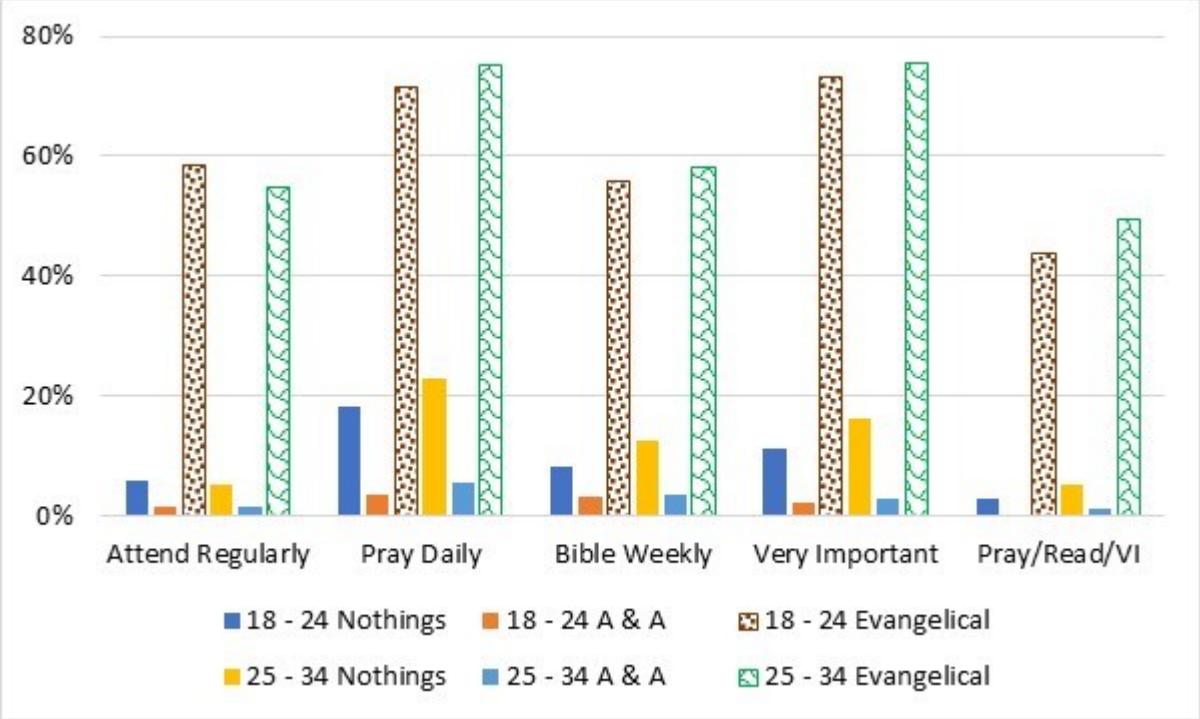
As shown, the figure looks at the answers to these questions for three different groups:

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.

Lessons from Camp Quest

In August of this year, the North Texas Church of Freethought (NTCOF) hosted Camp Quest Texas on a farm outside of Dallas. This eight–hour event for children of atheists, agnostics and other "free thinkers" included nearly 40 children between the ages of five and 15. According to a published report{1} , the day began with an exercise in making up creation myths based on the Apache story of fire before leading into activities with exotic animals, fossils and staged UFO sightings. The primary purposes of the event were twofold:

> *• Encourage the children to have open minds and embrace scientific skepticism*
>
> *• Provide a fun experience for the children where they could make friends among the community of non-believers. This objective was partially motivated by a desire to counter negative experiences some of the children had experienced with schoolmates who believed in God.*

Let me begin by stating that I applaud the organizers and parents for taking positive steps to encourage their children to ask good questions and look for good answers. Even though I suspect that the event was slanted towards promoting an atheistic worldview, I believe all parents should assume an obligation to steer their children toward the truth as they see it. At the very least, they should equip their children to see through the illogical arguments of some enthusiastic proponent of a cultic religion (even if they think that I am just such a proponent!).

The newspaper account of this event and an accompanying interview with the executive director of NTCOF can teach us several lessons as we evangelicals take on the task of raising younger generations.

Background

Before looking for takeaway lessons, let's investigate a little more background. Zachary Moore, the executive director for NTCOF, described their church this way:

"We're a church of freethinkers, which means that we try to understand the natural world by relying on reason and evidence. Like most people, we enjoy spending time with others who share our values and have similar interests. Forming a church just seemed like the natural thing to do, since many of us thought the only thing wrong with churches were the strange things they told you to believe in."{2}

At one time, Zachary considered himself a believer in Christianity. At some point, he came to the conclusion that the evidence did not support his belief in God. As he said,

"If Christianity were true, then I would want at least what Doubting Thomas got. If another theistic worldview were true, then I'd need something equivalent. I don't think it's too much to ask to be able to talk to a deity personally before I'm asked to worship it."{3}

This question, "If God wants me to believe in Him, why doesn't He present me personally with overwhelming evidence?" is one of the classic hard questions raised against our faith. The purpose of this article is not to answer this question, but if you want more information you can find it at Probe.org (see related articles).

Zachary and the NTCOF represent a point of view that is heavily in the minority among Americans, but is growing move vocal as it grows numerically. Recent Pew Institute surveys indicate that the number of atheists, agnostics and others who claim no faith is less than 10% of the population. However, a 2007 Barna survey provides a revealing look inside that statistic.

The table below shows the number of people with "no faith" in each age demographic based on surveys taken in 1992 and 2007. The data reveals two important trends. First, the number of people claiming no faith in God in 2007 grows markedly higher with each younger generation, more than tripling from the 6% for those over 61 to 19% for those from 18–22. Second, the percentages for each generation have not changed significantly in the last fifteen years. We don't see more people turning to faith as they grow older. It appears that the skeptics remain skeptics as each generation ages.

Percent of Americans who are atheist or agnostic{4}:

Generation	Ages in 2007	1992 Survey	2007 Survey
Adult Mosaics	18-22	–	19%
Boomers	23-41	16%	14%
Busters	42-60	8%	9%
Elders	61+	4%	6%

Could it be that our secular schools, culture and public square are creating their expected result—generations that are becoming more and more secular? It also appears that on average, once people reach the age of 18, their belief in God is pretty much set for life.

How should we respond to this trend of succeeding generations turning away from God? I believe the report on Camp Quest reveals some lessons we can take away and apply to this question. I want to consider three possible lessons:

- *Respect those who express doubts*
- *Understand that the Truth is not afraid of skepticism (or scientific inquiry)*
- *Don't be intimidated by an unfriendly world.*

Respect Those Who Express Doubts

Many of the children attending Camp Quest felt like they are living in a culture where it is taboo to ask the question, "Why should I believe in God?"

One fourteen year old boy "was at camp hoping to meet some nonbelievers his age. All his friends in Allen believe in God, he said, and he tries to keep his atheism a secret from them. 'They'd probably avoid me if they knew,' he said."{5}

“Another boy, 14, whose stepfather requested his anonymity, started home-schooling this year after enduring years of bullying for his open atheism.”{6}

In my opinion, looking at the experience of the Quest campers gives startling insight into the issue of teenagers from Christian homes turning away from the church in their college years.

Consider a teenager from a Christian family who has questions about the God they learned about in Sunday school. Where can they get some answers to the tough questions? They look around and see how their peers and parents react to other children who question the party line. They realize they may risk status with their peers if they ask these questions. So, at a time when they are around Christian adults on a regular basis who could help them deal with the tough questions and the evidence for God, they are intimidated into keeping silent. Once they leave the home for college or other vocations, they enter an environment where the primary people that claim to have answers to these questions are belittling Christianity as a crutch for people who believe in myths.

In other words, if the children of atheists are afraid to bring up their doubts in public, how much more do many children from Christian families feel forced to go through the motions while hiding their major doubts and concerns?

If we teach our children to respect those with genuine questions about God, we receive a double benefit:

- *Our children will be more willing to bring up questions that cause them to struggle.*

- *Our children will have opportunities to hear the questions of others who need to know Christ. If we model for our children a gentle and respectful response to peoples’ questions/beliefs, their friends are more likely to be willing to share their questions with them.*

Understand That the Truth Is Not Afraid of Skepticism (or Scientific Inquiry)

Most parents at Camp Quest indicated that they did not want to dictate their children's beliefs, but clearly they wanted to impact the thought process. As one mother stated:

"Our job isn't to tell children what to think," she said. "It's about opening up their minds and learning how to ask good questions."{7}

Just as we hope that the children at Camp Quest will ultimately ask the right questions about the purpose of life and their eternal destinies, we should encourage our children to examine the truth claims of Christianity. After all, Jesus told Pilate:

'For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." John 18:37-38 (*NASU or New American Standard Updated*.)

Lies and hoaxes are afraid of skeptics. The Truth welcomes skeptics because it shines in the light of examination. If we are willing to examine the truth with our children, it will build their confidence in their faith.

Many teenagers in Sunday School and youth meetings learn the things that Christians do (and don't do) and some things that Christians believe, but never learn about why we believe that the evidence for Christianity is strong and a biblical worldview answers the hard questions better than any other worldview. I suspect that many teenagers get the impression that their pastors and teachers are afraid of hard questions and want to avoid them. Perhaps in too many cases this suspicion is reality.

This reinforces what we have stated in prior articles on the

subject of youth retention (see The Last Christian Generation, related articles). We need to:

- *Encourage students to ask tough questions and respect them for doing so.*
- *Equip parents and student leaders with solid answers for the tough questions.*
- *Take the initiative and address these topics in Sunday school and youth meetings even before the students ask the questions.*
- *Point them to resources like Probe for those that want to go deeper into these topics.*
- *Expose them to Christian adults who are living out a mature biblical worldview*

Don’t Be Intimidated By An Unfriendly World.

How many of us can identify with the following statement:

> *Just as evangelical adults need social support from their church, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school because their parents are evangelicals, or because they’re sharing their own faith at school. It can also be challenging to be an evangelical parent when most people assume that you’re intolerant and ignorant if you teach your children to believe in hell and in Jesus as the only way to heaven. Christian camps provide a valuable resource for parents, plus they are full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our values——faith in Christ, love for God and our neighbors, good morals, and a desire for others to receive eternal life.*

It rings true, doesn’t it? It is interesting to consider that

the statement above is a slight modification of a statement made by Zachary Moore:

> *Just as freethinking adults need social support from groups like the NTCOF, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school or in their neighborhoods because their parents are freethinkers, or because they're developing their own freethinking perspective. It can also be challenging to be a freethinking parent when most people assume that you're immoral if you don't teach your children to believe in a god. Camp Quest Texas provides a valuable resource for parents, plus it's full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our freethinking values – science, critical thinking, ethics and religious tolerance.{8}*

American society as a whole does not have a high regard for atheism. However, in many ways, our public sector and public schools are more supportive of the NTCOF than they are of evangelicals. This is the reality our children will become adults within. We need to encourage them through a community of like–minded believers while at them same time preparing them to stand up in an unsympathetic and sometimes hostile public square.

Youth groups and Christian camps are not refugee camps to protect our children from the world. They need to focus on equipping them and encouraging them to stand for the Truth in whatever cultural setting they encounter.

You may not be excited about the prospect of a Church of Freethought. However, their experience and reactions may help expose some our inadequacies in preparing our children to stand firm in their faith in this world. Let's make sure that our children know that we are open to their hard questions and are prepared with real answers.

"For he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" Heb 11:6-7 (*NASU*).

Notes

1. Avi Selk, "Secular kids' camp in Collin County aims to provide questions, not answers," *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 2009.

2. Rod Dreher, "A church for skeptics," *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 2009.

3. Ibid.

4. Barna Group, "Atheists and Agnostics Take Aim at Christians", June 11, 2007, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/102-atheists-and-agnostics-take-aim-at-christians.

5. Selk.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Dreher.

© 2009 Probe Ministries

Related Articles:

- The Answer is the Resurrection
- The Last Christian Generation