

## **2009 in Review: Reflecting on a Barna Report**

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This week, George Barna synthesized the research findings across numerous studies completed during 2009 and summarized major themes that emerged from his research regarding religion. (See the report at [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).) In this article, three themes Barna identified are summarized, with my own observations added.

### **Americans are more interested in faith and spirituality than in Christianity**

For several years, the shift from Christianity to spirituality or “faith” (in some general sense of the word) has been occurring. The shift to a generic version of “faith” does not necessarily imply Christian faith. We are observing a fundamental shift in cultural values and assumptions so that many of the foundations that undergird traditional Christianity are being shaken or removed.

Several dynamics are at work. **One**, faith in our society has been personalized. The transfer of faith from the public to the private arena has resulted in fewer external controls on my faith and a greater tendency toward “selective faith development” where I choose what I consider the best aspects of various faith systems. **Two**, this selective synthesis is possible because of lessened commitments to and involvement in traditional faith organizations. Thus, I am free to develop my own faith without a religious organization telling me what the shape of my faith should be. **Three**, being a Christian or identifying with a specific Christian group is not as attractive as it used to be. This can be traced to several factors: (1) the mass media have unfavorably caricatured the Christian faith, devout Christians, and Christian churches; (2) Christianity has suffered from numerous, public “bad examples”; (3) many are willing to embrace Christ but not Christianity or the church; (4) to the extent that these are understood as a package deal, many, especially young adults, find typical expressions of Christianity unappealing. **Four**, at the same time, a primary source of faith is now found in marketplace of ideas, beliefs, relationships, habits, rituals and traditions, with individuals choosing those components that are personally comfortable, make sense, or meet needs. **Five**, these dynamics work in tension with one another. The idea of adopting a particular system of faith concepts (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or other options) has appeal because it provides identity and the possibility of belonging to something meaningful. But the individualization of faith insists that each person have the opportunity to choose specific components based on momentary needs and perceptions.

### **As faith is individual and personalized, many are comfortable with new or different spiritual experiences, especially if they can participate in shaping their faith experience**

Brand loyalty is all but gone from the American religious experience. Americans are loyal to themselves. Religion (faith) is more about being happy, successful, comfortable and secure and less about discovering truth or finding relationship with God. With this changing focus, spirituality is sufficient, traditional Christianity, including church attendance, is unnecessary.

Consider these survey results cited by Barna:

- Only 50% of adults say Christianity is still the automatic faith of choice in the US
- Yet 88% agree strongly or somewhat that religious faith is very important in their life
- 74% say their faith is becoming more important in their life
- Most Christians are comfortable with the idea that the Bible and sacred books from non-Christian religions all teach the same truths and principles
- 50% say that a growing number of people are tired of the same church experience

With the focus shifting from Christianity to a syncretized general religious experience, and from what God wants to what I want, the tendency is “to draw from a wide treasury of moral, spiritual and ethical thinking to construct a uniquely personal faith. Freed from the boundaries of the Christian faith, immersed in a postmodern society which revels in participation, personal expression, satisfying relationships, and authentic experiences, many become their own unchallenged spiritual authorities, defining truth and reality subjectively.”

This results in hybrid faith systems with elements from different historical eras and divergent theological perspectives. Barna suggests this may be, “the ultimate ecumenical movement’ where nothing is deemed right or wrong, and all ideas, beliefs and practices are assigned equal validity. Everyone is invited to join the dialogue, enjoy the ride, and feel connected to a far-reaching community of believers. Screening or critiquing what that community believes is deemed rude and inappropriate. Pragmatism and relativism, rather than any sort of absolutism, has gained momentum.”

I have labeled this tendency “omni-denominationalism” as opposed to a non-denominational plea. When a particular idea or activity is proposed, the answer in many religious groups is, “Sure, we can do that!” The result is an odd mixture of humanism, spiritualism, reincarnation, mysticism, the occult, candles, incense...you name it.

Some of the Barna survey findings related to this theme include:

- 45% say they are willing to try a new church or a new form of church
- 71% say they develop their own religious beliefs rather than accept a package of beliefs promoted by a church or denomination
- 75% believe God desires connection with Him through different means and experiences than were common in the past
- 64% are willing to experience faith in different environments or structures than in the past
- Only 34% believe in absolute moral truth

### **Biblical literacy is neither a current reality nor a goal in the U.S.**

Barna’s findings show little progress toward or desire for becoming more biblically literate.

“Bible reading has become the religious equivalent of sound-bite journalism. When people read from the Bible they typically open it, read a brief passage without much regard for the context, and consider the primary thought or feeling that the passage provided. If they are comfortable with it, they accept it; otherwise, they deem it interesting but irrelevant to their life, and move on. There is shockingly little growth evident in people’s understanding of the fundamental themes of the scriptures and

amazingly little interest in deepening their knowledge and application of biblical principles.

Barna notes that some of the critical assumptions of preachers and Bible teachers are inaccurate.

“The problem facing the Christian Church is not that people lack a complete set of beliefs; the problem is that they have a full slate of beliefs in mind, which they think are consistent with biblical teachings, and they are neither open to being proven wrong nor to learning new insights. Our research suggests that this challenge initially emerges in the late adolescent or early teenage years. By the time most Americans reach the age of 13 or 14, they think they pretty much know everything of value the Bible has to teach and they are no longer interested in learning more scriptural content. It requires increasingly concise, creative, reinforced, and personally relevant efforts to penetrate people’s minds with new or more accurate insights into genuinely biblical principles. In a culture driven by the desire to receive value, more Bible teaching is generally not viewed as an exercise in providing such value.”

Some of the survey-based results that led Barna to his conclusions include the following:

- 68% of Christians have heard of spiritual gifts (a decline in the past decade) but only about 1/3 can actually identify a biblical spiritual gift they claim to possess
- Only 19% of Christians have a biblical worldview
- Only half of Christians believe the Bible is totally accurate in the principles (not facts, just principles) that it teaches
- Only 27% are confident that Satan exists
- Less than 40% believe one can be influenced by spiritual forces such as angels or demons
- 81% contend that spiritual maturity is achieved by following the rules in the Bible
- Only 4% believe that poverty is an issue that is primarily the responsibility of the Church

“Not surprisingly,” Barna notes, “our research found that a majority of churchgoing adults are uncertain as to how their church defines a ‘healthy, spiritually mature follower of Christ’ and are not likely to have personally developed a clear notion of such a life.”