

Barna Report: Christianity no Longer the Default Religion in the U.S.?

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Introduction and Survey Summary

The most recent Barna research report (Jan. 12, 2009, www.barna.org) reveals that about half of all adults now see Christianity as one religious option among several, undermining the long-standing assumption that being born in the U.S. suggests a high probability of growing up in and eventually affiliating with the Christian faith. The research also accentuates a growing trend toward individualism in religion, revealing that a "huge majority of adults pick and choose what they believe" as opposed to adopting a predetermined set of beliefs in a church or denomination. Included in the survey were questions about the connection between faith and moral decisions, that is, the importance of faith as a personal moral guide. The report suggests that faith is becoming more important as an objective moral guide. The purpose of this article is to suggest the significance of the results and to provide additional perspective beyond the report.

The Place of Christianity in U.S. Culture

The influence of traditional Christianity, as reflected in the activities and practices of most Christian churches, is diminishing in our society. The survey results confirm what most churches have experienced in the last two decades. While some mega-churches and meta-churches are visible and influential in our society, overall involvement in and attendance at Christian religious services has diminished. My research shows that church attendance in the U.S. is as low as 15-20% of the entire population on any given Sunday, and in some areas of the country is likely even lower. The problem is not that Christians are transferring to another (non-Christian) religion as much as it is that traditional versions of Christianity are being rejected. A better headline than that which appears above (and on the report) may be that the "traditional version of Christianity is no longer the default religion in the U.S." The population is increasingly unchurched as traditional versions of Christianity fall out of favor. That the population is increasingly unchurched should not, however, be identified as lack of religious fervor or interest. Many are opting for personalized or individualized religions which pick and choose beliefs and activities, and do not necessarily include a shared worship experience in a public setting. Many of these unchurched persons still identify with Christianity, but not with the traditional version of Christianity. Conclusion: the place Christianity occupies in our society is less and less identified with traditional Christian churches (based on involvement and attendance) which are being rejected in favor of individualized religious beliefs and practices chosen from a potpourri of options which often includes non-Christian religious practices or beliefs.

Religion and Morality

The influence of Christianity on morality appears to be diminishing. While about three-fourths of adults agreed that their religious faith was increasingly important as a moral guide, the corollary is that almost one-fourth see faith as less and less connected to their moral decisions. In fact, only about four out of ten of those without Christian affiliations affirm an increasing role of faith in moral decisions or judgments. Only two-thirds of the 'non-born again' Christian respondents see faith as increasingly important to their moral decisions. Conclusion: our society overall is less and less committed to the Bible as a moral guide. Those who use the Bible are willing to pick and choose the parts they find helpful and to discard the remainder.

The Importance of Doctrine

The influence of Christian churches has diminished doctrinally. In times past, people attached a great deal of importance to doctrinal accuracy and chose churches based on their teachings. The contemporary approach is "doctrine a la carte". The survey results emphasize that people no longer look to churches for doctrinal direction, and are less willing or likely to adopt completely a church's slate of theological positions. Almost three-fourths said they are more likely to develop their own set of religious beliefs than to adopt a set a beliefs taught by a particular church. Even among born again adults, 61% affirm a personal belief system different than the church's belief system. Among those under 25, 82% say they will develop their own combination of beliefs rather than adopt the church's belief system. Most alarming in this theological individualism and doctrinal individualism is the adoption of views considered

false or contradictory in traditional Christianity. Even among those who describe themselves as Christian, close to half believe that Satan does not exist, one-third contend that Jesus sinned while He was on earth, two-fifths say they do not have a responsibility to share the Christian faith with others, and one-quarter dismiss the idea that the Bible is accurate in all of the principles it teaches.

Summary

George Barna offered several observations, based on the research.

- The Christian faith as it is practiced in the U.S. less and less challenges the supremacy of individualism, and is more and more a faith being defined through individualism. Americans are increasingly comfortable picking and choosing what they deem to be helpful and accurate theological views and have become comfortable discarding the rest of the teachings in the Bible.
- Growing numbers of people now serve as their own theologian. One consequence is that Americans are embracing an unpredictable and contradictory set of beliefs. Barna points out, as an example, that millions of people who consider themselves to be Christian now believe that the Bible is totally accurate in the lessons it teaches at the same time that they believe Jesus Christ sinned. Millions contend they will experience eternal salvation because they confessed their sins and accepted Christ as their Savior, but also believe a person can do enough good works to earn eternal salvation.
- In the past, people determined their theological and moral points of view from exclusively Christian alternatives. Today, Americans are more likely to include non-Christian options in their alternatives. The result is a plethora of unique worldviews based on personal combinations of theology drawn from a smattering of world religions and secularism.
- Faith is increasingly viral rather than pedagogical. With people spending less time reading the Bible, and less engaged in activities that deepen biblical literacy, faith views are more often adopted on the basis of dialogue, self-reflection, and observation than teaching. Feelings and emotions now play a significant role in the development of people's faith views, sometimes a more significant role than information-based exercises such as listening to preaching and participating in Bible study.

To Barna's conclusions, I would add the following.

- The door stands open for any Christian church that will find its identity in foundational doctrines and avoid the tendency to build a doctrinal superstructure of teachings which are not at the core of Christian faith but are rather derived from tradition or cultural. From the foundational teachings of Christianity, each individual Christian can then build a personal conscience of discipleship. Cookie-cutter Christians, or Christian clones, are not found in the New Testament.
- To encourage biblical literacy is increasingly important. Biblical literacy includes the ability to understand and interpret the Bible—not just to know what someone thinks about it. Almost three decades ago, a good friend of mine told me that the greatest problem the church faced was biblical illiteracy. If the truth of his words was not apparent then, the intervening years have made the problem clear.
- The way we go about sharing faith must be reconsidered and updated. While knowledge is important (see paragraph above), people are brought to Jesus as Philip convinced Nathanael to “come and see.” Our own personal excitement, commitment, and lifestyle attract and convince others. Our individual lives must adorn the gospel and make Christianity attractive. The life we share as the body of Christ must be equally attractive and vital.

May God help us demonstrate the love of God and declare by our lives the One who is Only Savior.