

Perspective Digest

Manuscript 1310

Now Worldview Captivates American Christians (Frontiers of Theology)

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NEW WORLDVIEW CAPTIVATES AMERICAN CHRISTIANS*

Read the latest poll report on religion in American life and you're likely to say, "So what else is new?" Today, 96 percent of Americans surveyed say they believe in God or a universal spirit. In 1947, 95 percent said they believed in a higher power. Today, 71 percent believe in an afterlife, only two percent less than 50 years ago. Ninety percent say they pray, the same as 50 years ago. And 41 percent attend church—including synagogue, mosque, meetinghouse, and temple—once again the same as in 1947. The conclusion of the poll takers, the Princeton Religion Research Center: Belief in God and an afterlife, as well as commitment to prayer and church attendance, have remained generally consistent over the past 50 years.

Yet, despite such apparent theological consistency, Americans have never been more enamored of Eastern philosophies, self-help faith strategies, and alternative forms of spirituality, according to sociologists and religious leaders. And denominational loyalties frequently are cast aside. People are as apt to look for a

convenient location or an elaborate nursery as for a particular interpretation of Scripture.

Says Gallup: "Most Americans don't know what they believe and why, quite frankly."¹

Mind-boggling Subcurrents

George Barna, a West Coast pollster, has a more pessimistic view than Gallup's of the "subcurrents" of change revealed in the Princeton report's findings. For example, in 1947, says Barna, "the vast majority of people believed in a God described in the Bible." Today, one-third of Americans who say they believe in God actually worship a "higher consciousness" or an Eastern god or "many gods." Between three and four percent believe they are God.

As to an afterlife, Barna says, "more people are buying into Eastern philosophies, reincarnation and other stuff."

He is still reeling from the results of a new question in the January Barna poll regarding belief in the Holy Spirit, traditionally regarded as the third person of the Trinity. More

than half of those identified as “born again Christians” (43 percent of those surveyed) denied the existence of the Holy Spirit, calling it a “symbol of God’s presence and power, but not a living entity.”

Barna finds lack of belief in the Holy Spirit among Christians “mind-boggling.” He points out that the Bible says a person can be saved only through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The January 1997 survey contained more bad news for evangelical Christianity. One-third of “born-again” respondents denied the physical resurrection, and three in 10 said Jesus committed sins while He was on earth. More than half said that Satan, too, is only a symbol, not a living advocate of wrongdoing in people’s lives.

Says Barna: The rejection of such orthodox Christian beliefs, coupled with a relativistic culture, has led millions of adults to embrace a worldview totally at odds with the faith they profess. Further, the percentage of those who call religion “very important” in their lives has plummeted from 75 percent in 1952, the first year the question was asked, to 57 percent, according to a survey conducted last year. Also the number of people who believe religion to be important in society and who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible has declined.

Even more significantly, according to Barna, a “huge gap exists” between

what people say they believe and how they carry out their religious beliefs. The “percentage of the populace with a deep, transforming, lived-out faith is far smaller than overall percentages on religious belief would seem to indicate.”²

Concludes Barna on the approach of the millennium: “Two courses of action will best define our society for the coming decades: either moral anarchy or spiritual revival.”³ □

*This material is drawn from a report by Bill Broadway, Washington *Post* staff writer.

REFERENCES

¹“Religion has become the sport of infidels and skeptics because so many who bear its name are ignorant of its principles” (Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, p. 463).

²“Before the time for [a revival of primitive godliness] shall come, [Satan] will endeavor to prevent it, by introducing a counterfeit. In those churches which he can bring under his deceptive power, he will make it appear that God’s special blessing is poured out; there will be manifest what is thought to be great religious interest. Multitudes will exult that God is working marvelously for them, when the work is that of another spirit. Under a religious guise, Satan will seek to extend his influence over the Christian world” (Ibid., p. 464).

³“Notwithstanding the widespread declension of faith and piety, there are true followers of Christ in these churches. Before the final visitation of God’s judgments upon the earth, there will be, among the people of the Lord, such a revival of primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times” (Ibid.).