

# THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

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### RELIGION IN AMERICA: ON THE FAILURE OF POLLS TO TELL US WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

By Richard John Neuhaus

Surely the most striking thing about the representative data gathered in this issue (see the center-section Public Opinion Report) is the continuity in American religious belief and behavior. Not much seems to change. There is an uptick here and a downturn there, but, over the years in which such data have been collected, Americans stubbornly go on being, in the words of G.K. Chesterton, "A nation with the soul of a church." In his magisterial *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville called religion "the first political institution of the republic." Of course, in the 1830s he did not have the kinds of data presented here, and most contemporary survey research is not as assiduous as Tocqueville was in examining the public (or political) character and consequences of religion. Nonetheless, one expects that Tocqueville would be not at all surprised by what the studies of the last half century tell us about the perduring force of religion in American life.

#### "The Condition of American Life"

Garry Wills, the prolific social and political commentator, ponders the same phenomenon in his new book, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (Simon and Schuster). He notes that academic and media leaderships have generally been miseducated into believing that ours is a secular society, and they are therefore surprised when the religion factor erupts in a way that is hard to ignore. And so we are, from time to time, treated to a flurry of reports on the "revival" of religion. "Revivals do not need to be revived," writes Wills. "Revival is, like respiration, the condition of American life." Most Americans are in a more or less constant state of religious commotion. "It seems careless," Wills observes, "for scholars to keep misplacing such a large body of people."

In fact, more scholars seem to be paying more sustained attention. To mention just a few, Andrew Greeley has usefully brought together the data that underscore the above mentioned continuity (*Religious Indicators 1940-1985*, Harvard, 1989). Theodore Caplow

and his colleagues have done a remarkable in-depth study of Middletown (Muncie, IN), showing how, contrary to the expectations in the original Middletown study by the Lynds, religion today is more vibrant than it was half a century ago (*All Faithful People*, University of Minnesota, 1983). The much discussed 1980 Connecticut Mutual Life study was especially valuable in suggesting that religious commitment is the single most reliable variable in projecting social and political attitudes and behavior. The data, arguments, and counter-arguments reflecting a new attentiveness to the religion factor are summed up in *Unsecular America* (Neuhaus, ed., Eerdmans, 1986).

If, as Wills says, religious revival is "the condition of American life," it is not necessarily good news for those who are concerned about the integrity of religion or of our

Continued on page 3

#### IN THIS ISSUE

##### **Religion**

The lead article begins an extensive review of religion in American life and politics, and of polling on this subject. A Public Opinion Report looks at key survey findings.

##### **The U.S. and Iraq**

The American public's responses to the Gulf crisis over its first three months. Why is British opinion different from that on the Continent? Energy: Support for alternative fuels?

##### **Japan**

Commentary and a special Public Opinion Report on how the Japanese view their own society, and how Americans see Japan.

FOR MORE, see Contents, page 2

public life. It is simply something that must be understood by those who would understand America. In the view of biblical religion, religion itself is as riddled with moral ambiguity as any other dimension of human thought and action. As for our *public* life, much more work is required to understand the connections between religious belief and experience and the ways that Americans understand our life together in the *civitas*. Here we run into the inevitable difficulties posed by the public/private distinction — a distinction usually made in a manner that confines religion to the private sphere. I will be returning to that question in commenting on the data in this issue of *Public Perspective*. As might be expected — and this is to the great satisfaction of people who make their living in survey research — the data included here cry out for more, and more refined, data.

### Groping for an Understanding of Religion's Place

Survey research on religion is not usually a debate-stopper. On the contrary, findings generate new speculations and debates. Some findings give us, as it were, a snapshot of a general disposition, immediately raising questions as to why respondents answered a question the way they did. For example, 63% say that "religion can answer all or most of today's problems," while only 18% say "religion is out of date." This would seem to tell us that most Americans have a very high estimate of religion as a resource for personal and, presumably, public life. That is no doubt worth knowing, but it does not tell us much. "Religion" is a general category that includes all the things that churches and synagogues do — from communicating a message of eternal salvation to AA groups and other programs to help the "co-dependent."

Many more literate believers, themselves deeply committed, would not agree that religion can answer all or most of today's problems. They would not agree because their religion teaches that today's problems are essentially the problems that have attended and will attend fallen human nature until the End Time. And they would not agree because their religion teaches them that many human activities other than "religion" (e.g. science, commerce, technology, medicine) are intended by God to help us "answer problems." The question to which 63% answer Yes is highly ambiguous, and made the more so by the alternative posited: "Religion is out of date." There are numerous reasons for thinking that religion cannot (and should not) answer the world's problems other than because religion is out of date. One expects those reasons were in play among the 19% registered as having no opinion. This finding, then, tells us little more than that an overwhelming majority of Americans (and there is no reason why this would not include many of the 18% who think religion "out of date") is favorably disposed toward religion. No news there.

More interesting is the finding that 85% completely or mostly "agree that there are clear guidelines about what's good or evil that apply to everyone." "Guidelines" is a somewhat rubbery word, but is stiffened by the adjective "clear." Clear guidelines might generally be understood as something like rules, maybe even commandments. "Good or evil," one may speculate, was generally thought to include "right or wrong." Contra the moral relativisms pervasive in our elite cultures, 85% of Americans would seem to believe that there are objective and binding moral truths.

It is no surprise that, in situations of moral decision, the same Americans might appeal to "what is right for me," invoking the individualistic criteria of self-fulfillment. Nor is this necessarily hypocrisy, not even in the sense of the truism that hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue. It is probably less hypocrisy than very conventional human weakness. The language of individualistic relativism is made available through liberal educational and communications media, and it is no surprise that people, however guiltily, avail themselves of it when they cannot resist doing what they want to do.

### Private Conviction vs. Public Proposition

It is a finding of considerable salience that so many Americans believe that there are rules by which life *should* be lived. Those who are eager to reconstitute some kind of public moral discourse might take heart. One expects, however, that many, if not most, respondents who say that there are such "clear guidelines" would also recognize that there is no *public* agreement on what those guidelines are. Here we encounter the oddity of people saying that such guidelines "apply to everyone," while quickly adding that they would not "impose" their understanding of the guidelines on anyone. Here again the importance of the public/private divide becomes evident. The result is that, even if 99% of Americans affirmed the objectivity of moral truth, public life would remain operationally relativistic. There is an obvious confusion in saying that there are objective and universal moral truths that are "true for me." If they are objective and universal, they are true for everyone; they are, in short, *public*. Were the statement about "clear guidelines" clarified in a manner that distinguished between private conviction and public proposition, it seems likely that considerably less than 85% would so readily agree.

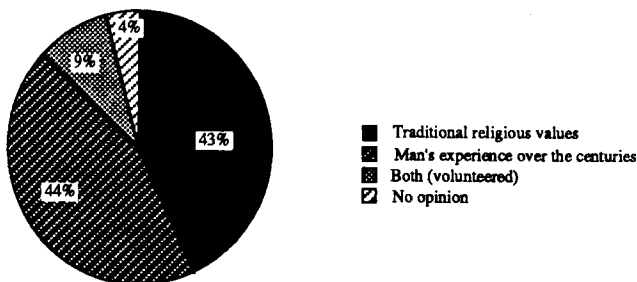
### False Dichotomies Everywhere

There are many other findings here that invite further questioning and cry out for distinctions. The connection between praying and feeling close to God, for example, is puzzling. According to some understandings of prayer, the eighty-plus percent who feel close to God

## Religion in America/Neuhaus/cont.

most of the time would seem to be engaged in prayer a great deal more frequently than the data suggest. Similarly confusing is the question about whether "you rely more on yourself to solve the problems of life, or more on an outside power, such as God." (Gallup survey, May 1987). Forty-five percent said more on self, 37% on an outside power. It is noteworthy that 17% of the respondents volunteered an answer that wasn't provided, namely, "both." The question posed by the survey is exceedingly unhelpful. For people of even minimal Christian literacy, to say that one relies more on self than on God is to indicate a lack of faith. On the other hand, to say that one relies more on God than on self indicates a shirking of moral duty. The 17% who rejected the answers that were proffered, one can confidently assume, are joined by many who went along with one answer or the other, although they really wanted to say that they "rely on God to help them solve the problems of life." That answer, unfortunately, was not proposed.

A similar instance of misleading choices being proposed is this: "Should morality and ethics be based more on traditional religious values, or more on man's experience over the centuries." (Gallup, May 1987) That is joined to the question of whether human progress is based more on "traditional religious values" or "man's reason and intellect, based on his learning experience." On both questions, the house is fairly neatly divided, some sensible people insisting upon a "both" answer that was not on offer. Even the minimally religiously literate know that the choice posed is a false choice, that it is precisely traditional religion (at least of the Christian and Jewish varieties) that teaches that history is the story of man's cooperation with, or failure to cooperate with, God through time. The "mostly God" or "mostly man" way of posing these questions flies in the face of both a Christian understanding of the Incarnation and a Jewish understanding of Covenantal responsibility.



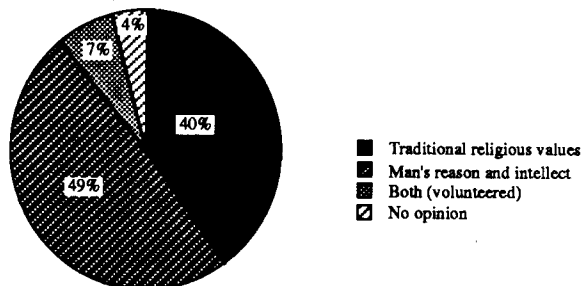
**Question:** Should morality and ethics be based more on traditional religious values, or more on man's experience over the centuries?

The data based on such questions is not, as some may think, an indicator of "secularity" or "religiousness." They indicate, one expects, which way people tilt when feeling obliged to choose between two propositions with which they are not comfortable. In response to the second question (whether positive change depends more on "traditional" — and therefore, presumably, unchanging — religious values or on human change) is especially remarkable. That fully 40% say that the unchanging is responsible for change indicates a great measure of intellectual sophistication, or sheer confusion. In most cases, it is undoubtedly the latter.

There is considerable interest today in the influence of "new religions," mostly of an Eastern provenance, and of "New Age" thinking. A Gallup Youth Survey taken in March 1989 would seem to be pertinent here. Belief in reincarnation is a common denominator in New Age and other such religious and quasi-religious movements. The Gallup data suggest that 31% of teenagers believe in reincarnation. But the formulation of the question makes the data of limited interest. Reincarnation was defined for respondents as "rebirth of the soul in a new body after death." Discussion in a teenage Bible study group in almost any local church would, I expect, show that "rebirth of the soul in a new body after death" is what many think the Apostles' Creed means by "the resurrection of the body." That invites us to view this finding with considerable suspicion.

### More "Scientistic" Than "Scientific"

Survey research authoritatively tells us a great deal about survey research. It tells us how people responded to questions posed to them in the circumstances in which they were posed. Limited to certain action alternatives (e.g. how people will vote in an election), it is, for the most part, quite reliable. But it is not, as sometimes touted, the



**Question:** In your opinion, which is more responsible for the advancement of mankind -- traditional religious values, or man's reason and intellect, based on his learning experience?

“scientific” way of understanding society, as opposed to the “anecdotal.” The real world is mainly anecdotal. The limits of survey research become more evident as the nature of the inquiry becomes more encompassing. It is severely limited if we want to find out how people understand the whole of reality and their place in it. Most people simply have not thought through such questions in a systematic or disciplined way. Faced with pollsters proffering cosmic-sized alternatives and asking for an answer on the spot, they could in most cases go as easily with one answer or the other, and, since most people do not want it thought that they have “no opinion” on too many questions of monumental moment, they will go with one answer or the other.

### **Uses and Limits**

That said, however, such data have their uses. It would seem to make a very big difference whether 95% (as is the case) or 25% of Americans say they believe in God, for example. That and related data are more confirmative than disclosive. (Except, of course, for scholars and others in our cultural elites who, in the words of Garry Wills, “keep misplacing” most of the American people.) The general picture that emerges from these data is that of an America in striking continuity with the America depicted by Tocqueville. What these and similar data are unsuccessful in illuminating is possible discontinuities.

Beyond professed religious belief and behavior, such as church going, we need to know the ways in which what is currently described as “religion” has in fact assimilated thoroughly secular attitudes, such as the cult of self-fulfillment and self-expression. It has been remarked that American society is, at the same time, thoroughly religious and thoroughly secular. There would seem to be much truth in that. In addition to the ways in which the religious assimilates the secular and the secular assumes

the religious, we need to understand how many Americans live in two “language houses,” operating by two quite different, and perhaps incompatible, vocabularies. That many do live this way is evident in the embrace of objective moral truths combined with operational individualistic relativism. As we have seen, this strange combination becomes most salient in the distinction between the private and the public in moral judgment.

America is still a nation with the soul, or at least with the sensibilities, of a church. But it is a curious church, with few fixed doctrines or liturgies, and with no definitive “magisterium” or teaching authority. There are sensibilities that the churches are always attempting to engage and, in the non-pejorative meaning of the term, exploit.

I conclude with a telling incident. The Roman Catholic bishops hired a prestige public relations firm to help them communicate their message about abortion. After much testing in “focus groups,” the firm concluded that the two most “sacred” words in contemporary American culture are “nature” and “choice.” It was therefore proposed that the bishops adopt as the theme of their campaign: “Make the natural choice. Choose life.” Maybe that is the way to go. But some may be forgiven for wondering whether saying “nature” where the Christian tradition might more naturally say “God” and saying “choice” where the tradition used to say “duty” might not work a greater change upon the church than the church will work on the culture.

God bless the pollsters, the focus groupies, and the data sifters. But our interest in a richer understanding of American society and of religion’s role in that society requires that we keep them firmly subordinate to sources of wisdom not amenable to survey research.

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