

Temporary Turnabout

Religion and the crisis



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By Michael A. Dimock, Peyton M. Craighill, and Melissa Rogers

In March 2001, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life began a partnership to conduct a series of national public opinion surveys on religious attitudes. With the events of September 11, we accelerated our agenda to investigate how religious beliefs shaped public reactions to the attacks on America, and how the attacks affected public views on the part religion plays in the United States, in the world, and in people's own personal lives.

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While media reports seemed to suggest a massive turning to faith in the wake of the crisis, what we found was that aggregate measures of religiosity and religious behavior among Americans have been remarkably stable over the past year. In surveys conducted No-

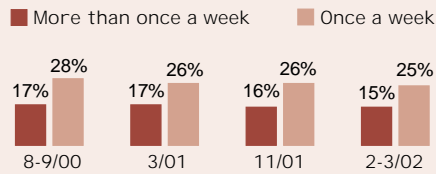
ember 13-19, 2001, and February 25-March 10, 2002, roughly six in ten said religion was very important to them (61% and 63%, respectively), proportions no higher than those shown previously in surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization and Pew

Figure 1

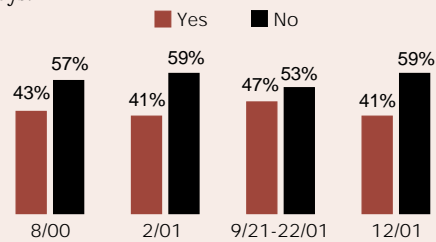
Religiosity Measures Remain Stable

Questions:

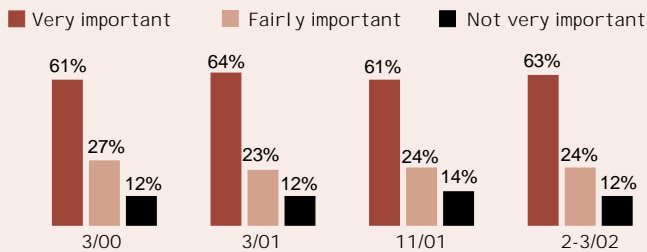
Aside from weddings and funerals how often do you attend religious services...?



Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?



How important would you say religion is in your own life...?



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization (March 2000, August 2000 and February 2001), Gallup/CNN/USA Today (September 21-22, 2001, and December 2001), and Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, latest that of February 25-March 10, 2002. The November 2001 and February-March 2002 PSRA/PRC surveys were done in collaboration with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

from 1994 to early 2001 (see Figure 1).

Self-reported attendance at religious services in both PRC/Pew Forum surveys was virtually identical to measures taken before the attacks. And a comparable measure of church attendance asked regularly by Gallup also found no change in October or December 2001.

Even in the weeks immediately following the attacks, the overall impact was muted, at best. A September 21-22 Gallup survey found 47% saying

they had attended church or synagogue within the previous seven days, but this was only slightly higher than the 41 to 43% reported in more typical weeks; and by December, this measure had fallen back in line with pre-9/11 surveys.

These findings seem to conflict with results from some post-9/11 polls. For example, 69% of respondents to a September 13-17 Pew Research Center poll said they were praying more as a result of the terrorist attacks. If so many were turning to

their faiths in the aftermath of the attacks, why didn't this register on the overall measures of religiosity?

The answer to this apparent contradiction is that any surge in religious behavior was of short duration, and primarily limited to those who were already highly religious. For example, the proportion of Americans saying they were praying more as a result of the attacks declined from 69% in mid-September to 57% in early October, and to 44% in mid-November.

And by November, at least, while 56% of those who said religion was very important in their lives claimed to be praying more as a result of the attacks, just 10% of those for whom it was not very important said the same (see Figure 2).

Similarly, the November PRC/Pew Forum survey found 16% of Americans saying they were attending religious services more often since the attacks. But again, these were people who most likely were already highly religiously active before 9/11, based on the absence of change in the overall percentage who said religion was very important in their lives, and in their attendance figures.

In short, while Americans already attending houses of worship regularly may have added more services and prayers to their schedules, there is little evidence that many others turned to religion after the attacks.

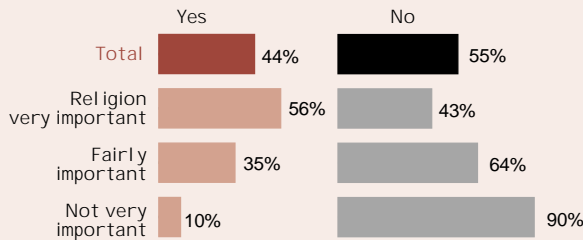
Though individual religious activity and intensity did not change substantially after 9/11, the way in which religion was perceived did, particularly with respect to its influence in America. In every survey conducted by Pew and Gallup, beginning in the 1990s, a clear majority has believed that religion's influence in the country was in decline. In the aftermath of 9/11, Americans of all faiths changed that

Figure 2

Those Who Pray a Lot Prayed More

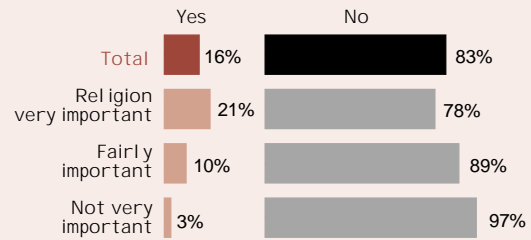
Question:

As a result of the terrorist attacks are you praying more or not?



Question:

As a result of the terrorist attacks are you attending religious services more or not?



Note: Percentages represent a crosstabulation of religious behavior by responses to the question, "How important would you say religion is in your own life?" (see Figure 1).
Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center/Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, November 13-19, 2001.

view. The November PRC/Pew Forum survey found 78% believing the influence of religion was on the rise, a result mirrored in a Gallup poll conducted approximately one month later (see Figure 3).

The breadth of this turnaround cannot be overstated. For respondents ranging from the most religiously committed evangelical Protestants to ag-

nostics and atheists, perceptions of religion's influence were turned upside down—and the shift occurred across racial, regional, and socioeconomic groups as well.

But the February PRC/Pew Forum survey found this to be a short-lived change, too. Just six months after the terrorist attacks, the public's view of the influence of religion had returned

to pre-September 11 levels, with 52% believing it to be on the decline, and 37% seeing it increasing. Again, the shift occurred across all demographic and religious groups. This abrupt reversal was all the more intriguing given the stability in the expressed importance of religion in people's lives.

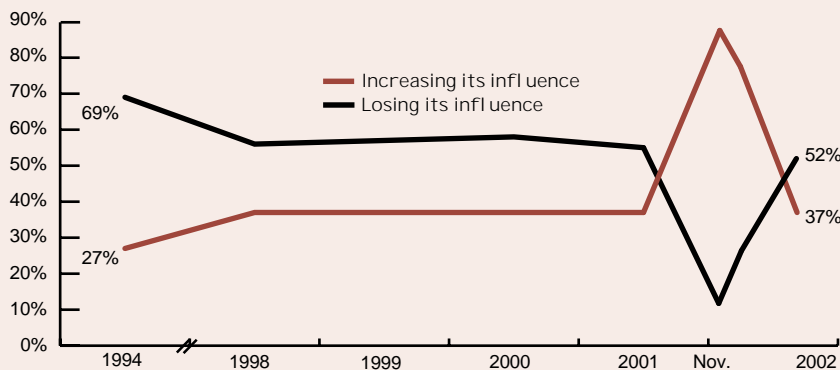
It was not a sign, however, that religion was in disfavor. Regardless of

Figure 3

How Deep an Imprint?

Question:

At the present time, do you think religion as a whole is increasing its influence on American life or losing its influence?



	Increasing	Losing
March 1994	27%	69%
June 1998	37	56
March 2000	37	58
March 2001	37	55
November 2001	78	12
December 2001	71	24
Feb.-Mar. 2002	37	52

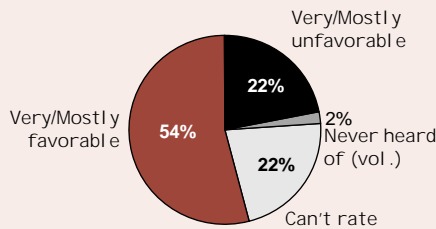
Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization (March 2000), Gallup/CNN/USA Today (March 1994, June 1998 and December 2001), and Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, latest that of February 25-March 10, 2002. The November 2001 and February-March 2002 PSRA/PRC surveys were done in collaboration with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Figure 4

Different Names, Different Perceptions

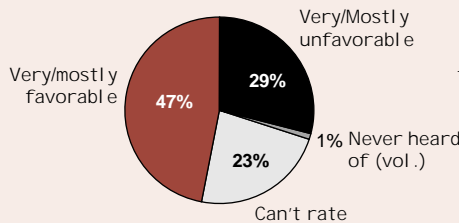
Question:

Now thinking about some specific religious groups, is your overall opinion of Muslim Americans very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?



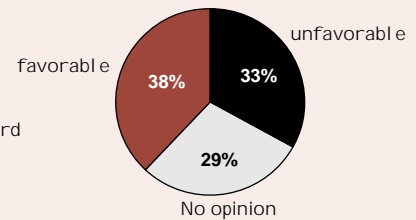
Question:

Now thinking about some specific religious groups, is your overall opinion of Muslims very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?



Question:

Would you say you have a generally favorable or unfavorable opinion of Islam?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center/Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, February 25-March 10, 2002.

whether Americans saw its influence waxing or waning, they were virtually unanimous in the view that more religion is better. Fully 84% of those who said religion was in decline thought the trend was a bad thing for the country, and almost the same proportion (85%) of those who saw it on the rise said this was a good thing. While religiously committed respondents were the most likely to take this view, even a majority of secular Americans concurred. [Secular Americans were defined as those who identified themselves as atheists or agnostics, and those with no religious preference who said they rarely, if ever, attended services.]

Respondents to the February survey said they saw religion in the world much the same way they saw it in America. Roughly half thought it was losing influence, while 38% thought the opposite. Of the minority who saw an increase, fewer than one in five (18%) said this was a bad thing. All in all, only about 7% decried what they perceived as a growing religious influence in the world, while 42% lamented a decline.

The same survey demonstrated the public's multifaceted view of the rela-

tionship between religious beliefs and violence in the world. On the one hand, 34% said religion played a major role in causing most wars and conflicts, and another 31% said it had a fair amount of impact. (This view was held more strongly by men than women.)

However, by a margin of nearly two to one (51% to 28%) Americans thought the bigger lesson to be taken from September 11 was that religion has too little influence in the world these days, not too much. This view was held consistently across all religious groups (especially strongly among white evangelical Protestants), with the lone exception of seculars, a majority of whom thought the terrorist attacks indicated too much religious influence in the world.

In fact, respondents, for the most part, simply did not attribute the recent violence to religious causes. In November, 49% said they believed the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon because of their political beliefs, while just 30% said religion motivated them.

The public also resisted blaming the Muslim faith in particular. Fifty-one

percent said the Islamic religion did not encourage violence more than others, while half as many (25%) said that it did. Moreover, fewer than one in five (18%) believed that most Muslims around the world were anti-American.

While they may not have attributed the recent violence directly to Islam, survey respondents held somewhat mixed views about the faith. Subsets of respondents to the February survey were alternately asked their opinions of Muslim Americans, Muslims, and Islam, and favorability varied greatly depending on these distinctions.

The public felt favorably toward Muslim Americans (54% to 22%), but was more divided when asked about Muslims (47% favorable, 29% unfavorable) and nearly evenly split in its perception of Islam (38% favorable, 33% unfavorable, see Figure 4). These differing gaps may have reflected an unwillingness on the part of many to rate individuals (Muslims) unfavorably, despite concerns about a belief system (Islam) as a whole. The difference in wording had the greatest effect on white evangelical Protestants, who were mostly favorable

toward “Muslim Americans,” but unfavorable toward “Islam.”

Relatively few respondents thought their own religions and Islam had much in common. Just 27% saw similarities, while more than half (57%) said Islam was very different. Roughly a third of white mainline Protestants, black Protestants, and white Catholics said the faiths had a lot in common. But just 16% of white evangelicals agreed, and just 11% of highly committed white evangelicals said they shared common ground with Islam, while 78% saw wide differences.

For the most part, Americans were unfamiliar with the Muslim religion, and this was highly correlated with many of their perceptions. In February, just 5% said they knew a great deal about Islam and its practices, and 29% said they knew some. The majority said it knew not very much (37%) or nothing at all (28%). And, to some extent, these self-evaluations were accurate. Fewer than half of respondents (47%) could identify “Allah” as the name Muslims used to refer to God, and even fewer (43%) correctly identified the Koran as the Islamic equivalent to the Bible.

Not surprising, those who knew more about Islam tended to feel more favorably toward the faith and to see more similarities between it and their own religions. However, knowledge did not necessarily dispel the concerns many had. Those who could answer both questions correctly were just as likely as those who answered neither correctly to believe that Islam encouraged violence among its followers. They were even more likely to think that many Muslims around the world were anti-American, and that “some reli-

gions” tended to encourage violence among their believers.

In keeping with their generally positive evaluations of Muslims, Americans’ religious attitudes were also noteworthy for their inclusiveness. When asked whether theirs was the “one true faith leading to eternal life” or whether “many religions can lead

Just 36% thought our society would be strong even if most Americans did not have a religious faith, while 58% said its strength was based on the religious faith of its people.

In this light, even though most Americans did not change their own religious practices following September 11, it is not surprising that

“Americans thought the bigger lesson to be taken from September 11 was that religion has too little influence in the world these days, not too much.”

to eternal life,” fully three-quarters answered the latter. Notably, this was the plurality position even among the most highly committed white evangelical Protestants, 48% of whom said many religions besides their own could lead to eternal life.

However, while generally open to religious diversity, many Americans had less favorable views of the nonreligious. A 54% majority had an unfavorable opinion of atheists, while just one-third (34%) felt favorably. (However, some of this might have reflected a particularly negative connotation to the term “atheist.” When asked an alternate form of the question about “people who are not religious,” just 30% expressed an unfavorable opinion, while 51% said they had a favorable view.)

In the February survey, 61% believed children were more likely to grow up to be moral adults when they were raised in a religious faith, while 35% said they were just as likely to be moral whether they were raised in a faith or not. And roughly half (47%) believed it was necessary to believe in God in order to be moral, while the other half (50%) did not.

their view of the influence of religion on American life was altered, if only for a relatively short time. Already aware of their own personal religious practices, news coverage of the public’s response to the attacks reminded Americans of how many others shared their perspective.

And, perhaps more important, the attacks served to accentuate for many the role of religion in the nation’s strength. Describing what he calls the “God Bless America” effect, University of Cincinnati political scientist George Bishop notes that the frequent repetition of this phrase in media reports following the attacks reinforced in people’s minds the part played by religion not only in personal moral behavior, but in civic society as well.

All in all, while many Americans turned to their faiths to help them deal with the trauma of the terrorist attacks, their personal ties to religion were neither strengthened nor weakened by the events of September 11. And, more broadly, the majority continued to believe that religion, in any form and for all people, was better than no religion. ●