

Religion in America

Will the Vitality of Churches Be the Surprise of the Next Century?

By George Gallup, Jr.

A clear understanding of the functioning of American society is impossible without an appreciation for the powerful religious dynamic that affects the attitudes and behavior of the populace. Ironically, though this dynamic is clearly evident, social commentators frequently downplay it.

A recent study conducted by The George H. Gallup International Institute for William Moss shows that Americans' concerns about society, democracy and the future are deeply rooted in their beliefs about God.¹ While most survey respondents hold staunchly to the view that one can be a good and ethical person without believing in God, a solid majority (61%) say that a democracy cannot survive without a widespread belief in God or a Supreme Being. Further evidence of the power of the religious dynamic in US society is seen in the fact that the importance one places on religion, and the intensity of one's faith, often has more to do with attitudes and behavior than such background characteristics as age, level of education, and political affiliation.

Religious Diversity and Vitality

The religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment to the US Constitution—described as perhaps the most important political statement of religious liberty and public justice in the history of mankind—are embodied in just 16 words: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." One need only look at the landscape of the United States to discover the importance of this provision for both the prominence given religion in our nation, and

its diversity. Nearly 500,000 churches, temples and mosques, of all shapes and sizes dot the landscape. There are no fewer than 2,000 denominations, not to

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mention countless independent churches and faith communities. The way to reach the American people is through their houses of worship—60% of the populace can be found attending them in a given month.

Clearly the US is a “churched” nation; in fact, the last 50 years have been the most churched half-century in the nation's history, judging from census and other data reported by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark in *The Churching of America*.² Levels of attested religious belief, surveys reveal, are extraordinarily high. Virtually all Americans say they believe in God or a universal spirit. Most believe in a personal God who watches over and judges people. Most believe God performs miracles today, and many say they have felt the presence of God at various points in their lives, and that God has a plan for their lives. A substantial majority believe that they will be called before God at Judgment

Day to answer for their sins. Americans attest to a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, although what is meant by “divinity” varies. Most believe in an indwelling living Christ, and in the Second Coming. We say we believe in Heaven, and to a lesser extent, Hell. Half of Americans believe in the Devil. Also, the vast majority of Americans believe the Bible is either the literal or inspired Word of God. We believe the Ten Commandments to be valid rules for living. (Table 1)

In the area of religious experience, some dramatic survey findings emerge. A remarkable and consistent one-third of Americans report a profound spiritual experience, either sudden or gradual, which has been life-changing. These occurrences are often the focal point in faith development.

Turning to experiences in the realm of traditional religion, more than one in three American adults (36%) say that God speaks to them directly. About four in 10 believe that during the time of the Bible, God Himself spoke out loud to people. And almost as many thought God spoke through other people. About half of persons interviewed believe God speaks today through the Bible/Scriptures. Forty-eight percent believe God speaks through an internal feeling or impression. Nearly a quarter of the people say that God speaks through another person and 11 percent said God still speaks audibly.³

Prayer has meaning for many Americans. Virtually everyone prays, at least in some fashion, and, we believe prayers are answered. A consistent four-in-ten Americans attend church or syna-

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gogue every week. Seven in ten say they are church members. One-third of Americans watch at least some religious television each week. The vast majority want religious training for their children. Millions of Americans attend athletic events every year—but *many more attend churches and synagogues*. Professional sports events gross *millions* of dollars—but Christians and Jews give *billions* to their churches as free will gifts.

Of key institutions that elicit respect in society, the church or organized religion rates near the top, and has consistently been in this position since the measurement began 20 years ago. The clergy are held in comparative high esteem. Generally speaking, they receive good marks from the public for the way they are dealing with the needs of their parishioners and the problems of their communities.

Fewer than one person in ten indicates that he or she has no religious preference. Only three out of every 100 Americans say their lives have not been touched at all by Jesus Christ, either in a supernatural sense or in the sense of Jesus being an ethical or moral influence on their lives. Three-fourths of Americans say that religion is currently very important or was important at some earlier point in their lives. Fifty-six percent are churched—people who are mem-

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One of the most remarkable aspects of America's faith is its durability. In the face of all of the dramatic social changes of the past half century—depression, war, the civil rights movement, social unrest, technological change—the religious beliefs and practices of Americans today look very much like those of the 1930s and 1940s.

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bers of a church or have attended services in the previous six months, other than for special religious holidays. The churched and unchurched are in a constant state of flux: Many people in churches are about to leave, but at the same time, many outside the churches are about to join. Half of the currently unchurched say there is a good chance that they can be brought back into the community of active worshippers.

It should come as no surprise to learn, then, that the United States is one of the most religious nations of the entire industrialized world, in terms of the level of attested religious beliefs and practices. As we look at other countries, we generally see an inverse correlation between levels of religious commitment and levels of education. The more highly educated a country's populace is, the less religiously committed and participating it is. The US is unique in that we have at the same time a high level of religious belief and a high level of formal education.

Impact of Religion

Religious feelings have spurred much of the volunteerism in our nation. Remarkably, one American in every two gives two or three hours of effort each week to some volunteer cause. This volunteerism is frequently church-related. Probably no other institution in our society has had a greater impact for the good than has the church. From the church, historically, have sprung hospitals, nursing homes, universities, public schools, child care programs, concepts of human dignity and, above all, the concept of democracy.

In one form or another, every religion teaches a gospel of service and charity. A study conducted by Gallup for Independent Sector reveals that America's religious institutions do as they say. Churches and other religious bodies are the major supporters of voluntary services for neighborhoods and communities. Members of a church or synagogue, we discovered in a Gallup Poll, tend to be much more involved in charitable activity, particularly through

organized groups, than non-members. Almost half of the church members did unpaid volunteer work in a given year, compared to only a third of non-members. Nine in 10 (92%) gave money to a charity, compared to only seven in ten (71%) of non-members. Eight in ten members (78%) gave goods, clothing or other property to a charitable organization, compared to two-thirds (66%) of non-members.⁴

Religion would appear to have an early impact upon volunteerism and charitable giving, according to the findings of another survey conducted by Gallup for the Independent Sector. Among the 76% of teens who reported that they were members of religious institutions, 62% were also volunteers, and 56% were charitable contributors.⁵ By contrast, among those who reported no religious affiliation, far fewer were either volunteers (44%) or contributors (25%).

Not fewer than 74% of US adults say religion in their homes has strengthened family relationships a great deal or somewhat. In addition, 82% say that religion was very important or fairly important in their homes when they were growing up. Those who say religion was important in their homes when they were growing up are far more likely than are those who say it was not important to indicate that it is currently strengthening family relationships “a great deal” in their homes.⁶ Interestingly, “moral and spiritual values based on the Bible” far outranked “family counseling,” “parent training classes” and “government laws and policies” as the main factor in strengthening the family, and was only superseded by “family ties, loyalty, and traditions.”

Eight in ten Americans report that their religious beliefs help them to respect and assist other people, while 83% say they lead them to respect people of other religions. Almost as many claim that their religious beliefs and values help them to respect themselves. In another study we determined that the closer people feel to God, the better they feel about themselves and other people.⁷

The survey also shows 63% stating that their beliefs keep them from doing things they know they shouldn't do. Only 4% say their beliefs have little or no effect on their lives. Still another survey shows that Americans who say religion is the most important influence in their lives, and those who receive a great deal of comfort from their beliefs, are far more likely than their counterparts to feel close to their families, to find their jobs fulfilling, and to be excited about the future. [Table 2]

Trends In Last 60 Years

The major perceivable swings in the religious life of the nation over the last six decades—the period charted by modern scientific surveys of the population—were a post-World War II surge of interest in religion characterized by increased church membership and attendance, an increase in Bible reading, giving to churches, and extensive church building. Religious leaders such as Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale, and Fulton J. Sheen had wide followings during this period. This surge lasted until the late 1950s or early 1960s, when there was a decline in religious interest and involvement. Today, there appears to be a “bottoming out” in certain indicators, if not a reversal of some of the declines.

Organized religion in America is regaining its strength, according to the latest Princeton Religion Research Center Index. Modern American religious belief and practice attained its peak during the 1950s, before the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s took their toll on most institutions, including religion. [See PRRC Index below.]

Despite these ebbs and flows, one of the most remarkable aspects of America's faith is its durability. In the face of all of the dramatic social changes of the past half century—depression,

war, the civil rights movement, social unrest, technological change—the religious beliefs and practices of Americans today look very much like those of the 1930s and 1940s. The percent of the populace who are active church members today closely matches the figures recorded in the 1930s. (One must note, of course, that for certain churches and denominations, these figures are not going in the same direction.) This ap-

Superficial...or Transforming?

The record of organized religion is impressive. But in trying to assess the impact of religion in America, it is necessary to examine religion on two levels: surface religion (such as being religious for social reasons) versus deep transforming faith (perhaps best measured by the way faith is lived out in service to others).

There is no gainsaying the fact that organized religion remains strong in our nation or the fact that religion has shaped America in distinctly positive terms. Yet when we use measurements to probe the depth of our religious conviction, we become less impressed with the depth of our faith, at least in terms of traditional religion. We believe in God, but this God is often only an affirming one, not a demanding one; He does not command our total allegiance. We pray but often in a desultory fashion, with the emphasis on asking, or petition, not on thanksgiving, adoration, intercession, or forgiveness. We revere the Bible, but many of us rarely read it. The proof is the sorry state of biblical knowledge among Americans—we are truly “biblical illiterates.”

Religious ignorance extends to a lack of awareness and understanding of one's own religious traditions and of the central doctrines of one's faith. The result is that large numbers of Americans are unrooted in their faith and therefore, in the view of some, easy prey for movements of a far-ranging and bizarre nature. We pick and choose those beliefs and practices that are most comfortable and least demanding. Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby calls this “religion à la carte.”

We want the fruits of faith, but less, its obligations. Of 19 social values, “following God's will” is far down the

Princeton Religion Research Center Index, By Decade

1994	658
1984	669
1974	684
1964	730
1954	749
1944	735

The PRRC Index is an ongoing measure of eight key religious beliefs and practices of the American public, including: belief in God; confidence in religion, church and clergy; and church membership levels. On the index the highest possible score is 1000—a mark that could be reached only if every single person in the US expressed total commitment to God and church. The current index score of 658 is the highest recorded since 1987.

plies to church attendance as well as to basic religious beliefs. Despite this consistent orthodoxy, Americans remain highly independent in their religious lives and independent of their religious institutions.

The religious liberty most Americans cherish and celebrate has enabled religion to flourish in many forms, and to become a profound shaper of the American character. Religious liberty has contributed vitality and vigor to the American outlook—an exuberance—a feeling that anything is possible—and often, the courage to bring about difficult but needed change in society.

Table 1
Basic Religious Beliefs...

Question: Do you believe that religion can answer all or most of today's problems, or that religion is largely old-fashioned and out of date?

	Is a member of a church or synagogue	Attended church/synagogue in the last 7 days	Says religion is "very important" in their life	Says religion "can answer all or most of today's problems"	Says "religion is largely old-fashioned and out of date"
Everyone	69%	42%	58%	62%	21%
By Gender					
Male	62%	37%	50%	55%	24%
Female	74%	46%	65%	68%	18%
By Age					
Under 30 yrs. of age	61%	31%	44%	55%	31%
30-49 yrs. of age	65%	40%	54%	61%	23%
50-64 yrs. of age	79%	53%	69%	70%	14%
65 yrs. old and older	75%	50%	72%	63%	13%
By Region					
East	68%	39%	55%	56%	27%
Midwest	72%	45%	57%	63%	21%
South	75%	47%	68%	74%	13%
West	55%	34%	48%	49%	27%
By Race					
White	67%	41%	55%	60%	22%
Black	82%	50%	82%	86%	7%
By Education					
Attended college	70%	44%	53%	58%	22%
No college	67%	40%	63%	65%	21%
Household Income					
\$50,000+	70%	41%	48%	56%	22%
\$30,000-\$49,999	72%	45%	56%	62%	22%
\$20,000-\$29,999	65%	41%	56%	60%	25%
Under \$20,000	67%	40%	66%	66%	21%
By Denomination					
Protestant	72%	45%	65%	71%	14%
Roman Catholic	77%	47%	51%	51%	33%

Table 1/cont.
...And Values of Americans

Percentage of adult public who say they believe in...*

God	Heaven	Miracles	Angels	Hell	Devil	Describes themselves as a "born-again or evangelical Christian"
96%	90%	79%	72%	73%	65%	36%
94%	86%	71%	65%	71%	63%	31%
97%	93%	86%	78%	75%	68%	41%
94%	89%	77%	75%	74%	67%	32%
96%	91%	84%	77%	76%	71%	35%
98%	91%	78%	69%	73%	61%	39%
96%	88%	74%	61%	64%	57%	40%
96%	89%	77%	64%	69%	55%	25%
96%	90%	76%	71%	77%	68%	37%
96%	93%	83%	84%	81%	77%	49%
95%	86%	79%	65%	60%	59%	30%
95%	89%	79%	71%	73%	65%	35%
100%	97%	79%	85%	74%	70%	51%
95%	86%	77%	69%	71%	62%	31%
97%	94%	82%	76%	76%	70%	42%
93%	86%	74%	65%	72%	61%	27%
97%	89%	82%	75%	77%	70%	37%
95%	92%	78%	73%	77%	67%	37%
98%	92%	82%	76%	71%	66%	45%
98%	94%	81%	74%	77%	70%	48%
98%	94%	81%	73%	80%	61%	17%

*Survey by the Gallup International Institute, 1994; All other categories and responses are from a survey by the Gallup Organization, 1994.

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list among the public's choices as the "most important," behind happiness and satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment and five other values. Of eight important traits, teenagers rate "religious faith" as least important, behind patience, hard work, and five other traits.⁸

Church involvement alone does not seem to make a great deal of difference in the way we live our lives. It is at the level of deep religious commitment where we find extraordinary differences—in outlook, in charitable activity, in happiness, and in other ways. The highly committed segment of the populace—the "hidden saints," if you will—comprise a small percentage of the population, but their influence is far out of proportion to their numbers. In my book *The Saints Among Us* (written with Tim Jones), we report that only 13% of Americans can be said to have a deep integrated and lived-out faith—as measured by a 12-item scale.⁹

Any such survey effort is bound to be imperfect—given the complexity and subtlety of religious feelings. Ours did, nonetheless, help identify people who truly live what they profess religiously. They may not be canonized or officially recognized, but they find deep meaning in prayer. They gain personal strength from their religious convictions. And they demonstrate more than mere religious sentiment. They often spend significant time helping people burdened with physical and emotional needs. They are less likely to be intolerant of other faiths, and more giving, more forgiving. They appear to have bucked the trend of many in society toward narcissism and privatism.

Three "Gaps"

The religious condition of Americans today can perhaps be best described in terms of gaps. First, there is an *ethics gap*—the difference between the way we think of ourselves and the way we actually are. While religion is highly popular in this country, survey evidence suggests that it does not change people's lives to the degree one would expect

from the level of professed faith. Perhaps such a gap must always exist. There is also a *knowledge gap*—the gap between Americans' stated faith and their lack of the most basic knowledge about that faith. Finally, there is a gap, a growing one, *between believers and belongers*—A decoupling of belief and practice, if you will. Millions of Christians are believers, many devout, but they do not participate in the congregational lives of their denominations. Americans increasingly view their faith as a matter between them and God, to be aided, but not necessarily influenced, by religious institutions.

The decoupling of faith and church stems in considerable measure from what has been called privatism, or "radical individualism," dramatically represented in a related series of beliefs. The vast majority of Americans believe that it is possible to be a good Christian or Jew without going to church or synagogue. They also believe that people should arrive at their religious beliefs independently of any church or synagogue. Lastly, a majority agree that it does not make any difference which church a person attends because one is as good as another.

Role of Surveys

With the advent of scientific surveys in the mid-1930s, observers of the religious scene gained greater confidence in drawing conclusions about the dynamics of religion in society. Such surveys have added a new dimension to the history of what average citizens believe and think. Yet probably no more difficult task faces the survey researcher than attempting to measure the religious *mood*. There is much about religion that defies statistical description: questions can be blunt instruments while religious beliefs are varied and subtle and do not yield easily to categorization. Complicating the effort to assess the spiritual climate through survey research is the difficulty of examining the findings on the basis of denominations and other religious groups—for example, fundamentalists, evangelicals and charismatics.

The terms are in flux, blurred and overlapping.

Nonetheless, surveys serve as an important reality check, by going to the people themselves, thus bringing the nation's elites in touch with mainstream America. Surveys are valuable as a way of obtaining factual information not otherwise available—for example, on church attendance and membership. Data collected by census means through individual churches is often incomplete and unreliable, due to differing classifications of members and collection methods. The Gallup Poll has devoted considerable time and money to reduce to a minimum the tendency of respondents to give the socially acceptable answer.

I expect the importance of religion to grow in the decades ahead, as religion is increasingly shaped from the people in the pews rather than by the church hierarchy. While scientific probing of the religious scene through surveys is beginning to catch up with survey research in other areas of life, I see an urgent need for more penetrating explorations into the religious life. We know a great deal about the *breadth* of religion in America, but not about the *depth*. Certainly one of the new frontiers of survey research is the "inner life."

The Future

Organized religion plays a large, pivotal role in American society. What's is much less clear—and far more difficult to predict—is the direction in terms of the depth of faith. It is at a level of deep commitment that we are most likely to find lives changed, and social outreach empowered. Will the nation's faith communities challenge as well as comfort people? Will they be able to raise the level of religious literacy? These are the questions that need to be addressed by the clergy and religious educators of all faiths. The threat to the traditional church is that an uninformed faith that comforts only can lead to a free-floating kind of spirituality, which could go in any direction.

Table 2
Americans Who Say Their Religious Faith is the Most Important Influence in Their Lives, Describe Their Lives More Positively

	Everyone	Agree "I receive comfort and support from my religious beliefs."	Agree "My religious faith is the most important influence in my life."
"You are generally a happy person"			
Agree Strongly	36%	69%	61%
Agree	61%	30%	35%
Disagree	2%	1%	2%
Disagree strongly	1%	1%	2%
"Your occupation is exciting and fulfilling"			
Agree Strongly	21%	36%	31%
Agree	46%	29%	34%
Disagree	14%	11%	10%
Disagree strongly	4%	6%	4%
"You are excited about your future"			
Agree strongly	25%	45%	39%
Agree	52%	35%	40%
Disagree	17%	11%	14%
Disagree strongly	3%	6%	5%
"You feel very close to your family"			
Agree strongly	53%	86%	80%
Agree	42%	12%	14%
Disagree	4%	1%	3%
Disagree strongly	1%	1%	1%
"You often get depressed"			
Agree strongly	4%	7%	6%
Agree	19%	13%	17%
Disagree	50%	33%	37%
Disagree strongly	26%	46%	40%
"You have a lot of stress in your life"			
Agree strongly	12%	18%	19%
Agree	35%	26%	28%
Disagree	42%	32%	33%
Disagree strongly	11%	23%	21%

Note: column percentages; read down.

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, March 1989. **Note:** Respondents were asked to rate the intensity of their beliefs on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "strongly agree" and 5 being "strongly disagree." This table compares the responses to another set of questions (left-hand column), by those who answered "strongly agree or agree" (1 or 2 on the scale) to the questions: "My religious faith is the most important influence in my life." and "I receive comfort and support from my religious beliefs."

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There is an exciting development in this nation—Princeton sociology Professor Robert Wuthnow calls it a “quiet revolution”—that merits close attention: the proliferation of small groups of many kinds that meet regularly for caring and sharing. A 1991 study conducted by The George H. Gallup International Institute for the Lilly Endowment revealed that 40% of Americans are so engaged, with another 7% interested in joining such groups, and still another 15% who had been members of such groups in the past. Sixty percent of these groups were related to a church or other faith community.¹⁰

Wuthnow, the director of this landmark study, notes in his book, *Sharing the Journey*, that a number of these groups tend to cultivate an “anything-goes” spirituality. There are, however, other groups, often related to a faith community, that challenge, as well as comfort participants; that help people in their faith journey; and encourage them to be open and honest with each other.

Small groups can serve as both a support for persons who find the church setting too impersonal, as well as an entrance to the larger community.

The growth of these groups, involving close to half the populace, and the intense searching for spiritual moorings suggest that a widespread healing process may be underway in our society. Because most Americans believe in a personal, approachable God (94% believe in God or a universal spirit, and 84% in a personal God who is reached by prayer), we are predisposed to reach out in this direction for guidance.

When functioning at a deep spiritual level, small groups can be the vehicle for changing church life from the merely functional to the transformational. They can help meet two of the great desires of the heart of Americans, particularly at this point in time: the desire to find deeper meaning in our world, and the desire to build deeper, more trusting relationships with other

people in our impersonal and fragmented society. If these desires are met, the vitality of our churches could well be the surprise of the next century.

Endnotes

- ¹Survey conducted for William Moss by the George H. Gallup Institute, September 1994.
- ²Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992; paper 1993).
- ³Survey by the Gallup Organization, 1986.
- ⁴Survey by the Gallup Organization, October 1989.
- ⁵Gallup Youth Survey, October 1990.
- ⁶Survey by the Gallup Organization, October 1986.
- ⁷Survey by the Gallup Organization, 1988.
- ⁸Gallup Youth Survey, March 1987.
- ⁹George Gallup, Jr. (with Tim Jones), *The Saints Among Us* (Richfield, CT: Morehouse Publishing, 1992).
- ¹⁰Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994).



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