



God Is Back!

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(Weekly Standard) *This column was written by Mark D. Tooley.*

Is America getting more secular? Not according to a new survey on Americans' religious beliefs, "American Piety in the 21st Century," published this month by Baylor University. According to the Baylor survey, 82 percent of Americans are Christians, 90 percent believe in God, 70 percent pray regularly, and half attend church at least once a month.

If Baylor is correct, Americans are demographically as religious, and as Christian, as they ever have been. But their denominational affiliations have become somewhat less structured. Less likely now to be Methodist or Lutheran, they are drifting towards more informal forms of evangelical Christianity.

Similar surveys in recent years have shown an increased number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation. But the Baylor survey proposes that those seemingly-secular increases merely reflected the decline in formal denominational affiliation. When Baylor delved into the practices of supposedly unaffiliated respondents, it discovered that many of them do attend church or Bible studies, pray, and associate with some form of Christianity or other organized religion.

Many, especially in evangelical churches, do not realize that they are worshipping as part of larger organized bodies. Mega-churches, such as Rick Warren's 20,000 member Saddleback Church in California, do not advertise their denominational flavor — which may help them attract the religiously uninitiated. Saddleback, for instance, is connected to the Southern Baptist church, but does not broadcast this affiliation.

The Baylor survey found that only about one in ten Americans is not religiously affiliated, a statistic similar to past decades (and less than the 14 percent claimed in other recent surveys). This difference may not sound large, but it represents 10 million Americans.

Many of those 10 million Americans who had inaccurately been counted as non-religious belong to evangelical Christianity, which now accounts for one third of the American population, and is the nation's largest religious demographic. Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics account for a little over one fifth each. Members of black Protestant churches account for 5 percent and Jews for 2.5 percent. Frustratingly, the Baylor survey lumped together all other categories — Eastern Orthodox Christians, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus — which together account for less than 5 percent.

Some results are expected. Easterners are likelier to be Catholics. Southerners are the most likely to be evangelicals. Westerners are the most likely to have no affiliation. Young adults are three times as likely to lack a religious affiliation as older Americans.

Even among that 10 percent who are firmly nonaffiliated, 60 percent believe in God or a higher power, and one third pray regularly. Ten percent of the unaffiliated are attending church regularly. Ten percent of the religiously unaffiliated believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

Not surprisingly, 95 percent of black Protestants and evangelicals believe that Jesus is God's Son, while 85 percent of Catholics and 75 percent of mainline Protestants believe it. Intriguingly, so too do 10 percent of Jews. Black Protestants and evangelicals are twice as likely to attend church weekly as mainline Protestants and Catholics. They are also 4 times more likely to read the Bible on a weekly basis than are mainliners, and 8 times more likely to do so than the Catholics.

Half of Americans describe themselves as "Bible believing." Blacks are the most comfortable with the phrase and women prefer the description more than men. Easterners and persons making more than \$100,000 are less likely to identify with it.

What other religious books do Americans read? About 20 percent are reading the "Left-behind" series, which are fictionalized accounts of the biblical end times. More than one quarter of Americans say they have read "The Da Vinci Code." (Catholics were the likeliest to have read it. Black Protestants were the least likely.) Black Protestants are the likeliest to have watched Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. More than half of them saw it.

The Baylor survey also confirmed that religious belief and practice are strong predictors of political beliefs. Evangelicals were the most consistently conservative in their politics. Theologically conservative Catholics are as politically conservative as evangelicals. Sixty percent of evangelicals support the Iraq war, as do 47 percent of Catholics and 45 percent of mainline Protestants. Only 26 percent of the religiously unaffiliated support the war. War supporters were predominant among men, southerners, and married people. War opponents were strongest in the East and among the unmarried.

The Baylor survey also tried to categorize Americans by whether they believed "God favors America" and by whether God is partial to a political party. Strong majorities rejected these statements.

It seems that Americans today are not all that different in their religious belief and practice than Americans of 40 or 70 years ago. The United States remains an overwhelmingly religious and predominantly Christian country. The major shift is that evangelical Christianity has become the strongest demographic among American religionists. And evangelicals, among all the religious groups, are the most consistent in their political outlook. This could bode well for Republicans. But it also explains why Democrats are striving to appeal to evangelicals at least linguistically, if not yet with actual policy.

The fading of 20th century liberal mainline Protestantism is not dissimilar to the decline of the old reigning East Coast denominations in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in the face of evangelical revival, especially on the frontier. Evangelicals then presided over much of the 19th century until culturally displaced in the early 20th century. The cycle is now repeating itself, illustrating the entrepreneurial and resurgent spirit of American religion. In many ways, this is reassuring.

Mark D. Tooley directs the United Methodist committee at the Institute on Religion and Democracy.