

Study: Generation X more loyal to religion

August 26 2010

Generation X, the set of Americans who came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is often branded as a rules-rejecting, authority-questioning group.

But when it comes to religion, new research has revealed that Gen-Xers are surprisingly loyal to their faith - a finding that also suggests the rising non-religious tide in the United States may be leveling off.

In a study published in the latest edition of *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, University of Nebraska-Lincoln [sociologist](#) Philip Schwadel showed that Gen-Xers are, in comparison with their Baby Boomer predecessors, far more likely to adhere to their religion. In fact, Boomers are 40 to 50 percent more likely than Gen-Xers to "disaffiliate" from their faith.

As [Generation X](#) continues to grow older, this loyalty may translate into a more stable nation in terms of its [religiosity](#), he said.

Schwadel examined General Social Survey responses from more than 37,000 Americans from 1973 to 2006. Using age, period and cohort models, the research zoomed in on two aspects of U.S. religious behavior through the decades:

- Non-affiliation, which is the total percentage of Americans not involved with any particular religion; and

- Disaffiliation, which measures those who had a [religious affiliation](#) while they were [adolescents](#) but then had no affiliation at the time they were surveyed.

"The proportion of Americans with no religious affiliation doubled in the 1990s and has continued to rise in the 21st century," Schwadel said.

"With the decline in religious disaffiliation among post-Boomer cohorts, it is possible that this growth in non-affiliation may soon level off."

Though Generation X's religious adherents are relatively durable, the generation as a whole is still more likely than previous ones to be raised with no religious preference, according to the research. Religious non-affiliation in the United States grew from between 6 percent and 8 percent in the 1970s and 1980s to nearly 16 percent by 2006.

Like previous researchers, Schwadel attributes this to the so-called "1960s effect" -- Americans who were children and young adults in the 1960s were disproportionately likely to disaffiliate with religion compared with previous generations. Consequently, many Boomers raised their Gen-X children in a non-religious environment.

Schwadel's research, however, shows that Gen-Xers are behaving differently than their parents. Although Gen-Xers are relatively likely to be raised with no religious affiliation, those who are raised with a religious affiliation are considerably less likely than their parents to separate from religion.

So why are religious members of Gen-X so much less likely to leave religion? For one, Schwadel said, the American religious scene is more dynamic and textured than it was when Baby Boomers were coming of age in the '60s and '70s, which has left the younger generation more choices. If they aren't happy with a particular religion, they can more easily find a substitute instead of falling away entirely.

"Social scientists have noted that what we call the 'religious marketplace' has greatly expanded in recent decades," Schwadel said. "Historically, it was thought that this religious pluralism was detrimental to the vitality of American religion. While many still hold this view, others suggest that more choices lead to greater religious affiliation and commitment."

The long-term impact of the decline in disaffiliation among post-Boomers remains to be seen, he said.

"While this trend is good news for those who worry about declining religious adherence, the Boomers' enmity toward organized religion is still evident in the relatively large proportion of their children and grandchildren who are raised with no religious affiliation," Schwadel said.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Citation: Study: Generation X more loyal to religion (2010, August 26) retrieved 3 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-08-loyal-religion.html>

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