

3Qs: Losing our religion?

August 9 2012, by Kara Shemin

The Pew Research Center American Values Survey, which polled more than 3,000 adults nationwide, found that approximately one in five Americans don't have a religious affiliation — the most ever documented. The survey, which was conducted in April and then released in June, also found that some 32 percent of Millennials have doubted the existence of God — double the number of those who felt the same way just five years ago. Northeastern University news office asked Susan Setta, an associate professor of religious studies in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, to explain the precipitous rise of unbelief among the young.

What has caused belief in God to wane, particularly among the young?

Although religious affiliation has waned in the U.S. since the Pew surveys began, the drop is small among most of the cohorts surveyed. The Millennial generation, however, shows a noteworthy decline from earlier surveys. Many factors, including actual decrease in belief in God, may be at work here. There may be other influences as well. Societal tolerance for differences in belief, for example, may be a key factor. Or, this group may simply be more willing to admit what they believe.

The Pew survey also found increased tolerance for difference in every age, religious preference and political group. One popular YouTube video of a young boy's Bar Mitzvah shows him questioning the existence of God in his lecture to the congregation. His instructors and the congregation laugh with delight when he says he is not sure whether he believes

in God. In addition, the Millennial generation is known for wanting to distinguish itself from its peers — to stand out so to speak — by sporting unusual ideas. This could be a factor as well.

Religiousness or its lack among America's youth is difficult to assess. A geographic study would provide interesting data by determining regional differences in religious activity among teens and young adults. Competition from sporting activities, with matches often held on Sunday mornings, a formerly sacrosanct time period, is one clear reason for decreased church attendance.

Religious identification has increased over the past decade among other generations, especially among aging Baby Boomers. In fact, the Pew survey found an increase in the percentage of Boomers who say they never doubt God's existence. Is it common for people to become more religious or spiritual as they age?

People tend to join churches in their child rearing years, but Baby Boomers who have been church affiliated do become more active as their child rearing responsibilities end and as their free time increases after retirement. Increased belief in God, however, is a different matter. As Baby Boomers age, their reluctance to admit to not believing in God may increase. It is perhaps an example of Pascal's wager. Blaise Pascal was a 17th-century philosophy who noted that there was no downside to believing in God. But, if God did indeed exist, he argued, there could be negative consequences from unbelief. If God did not exist, in contrast, there would be no negative consequences to a person who did believe.

A separate Pew study released late last month found that many Americans aren't aware of the religious

faiths of President Obama or presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney. According to the survey, roughly one-third of Americans don't know that Romney is Mormon and 17 percent believe Obama is Muslim. What are the dangers of misunderstanding an individual's religious affiliation, especially if that person is a political figure?

The change in American understanding of President Obama's religious affiliation continues to be surprising. In 2008, Americans were more likely to correctly identify his religious affiliation as Christian. At that time, political opposition to then presidential hopeful Obama called up the images of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright. Ironically, the political discussion about Pastor Wright's supposedly racist remarks had the effect of making it clear that candidate Obama was Christian.

The current Pew study shows that Americans are not opposed — and indeed some favor — strong religious ties in their political candidates. Yet misidentifying or misunderstanding that background can be important. A candidate's religious perspective can have a significant influence on his or her social beliefs, which is to be expected. Protestant Christians join churches or remain members of the group into which they were born because they agree with the teachings of their chosen religious affiliation.

A candidate's religious preference, then, can be an indicator of their stance on social issues. The Latter Day Saints (Mormons), for example, have conservative views on gender issues and homosexuality and on LDS members' ability to disagree with official teachings. The United Church of Christ, President Obama's chosen affiliation, is more liberal on these

issues. Unlike the LDS, the UCC will not show uniformity across all its congregations because doctrinal issues in the UCC are decided at the congregational level, not at a central institutional level, as is the case in the LDS.

Although Americans are tolerant of, and may favor, strong religious ties in their politicians, they do not approve of institutional interference in the political process as a 2006 Pew study showed. The difference between increasing tolerance for homosexual rights among the religiously affiliated and the stated views of their chosen tradition consistently exemplifies this.

Provided by Northeastern University

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