



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on February 26, 2010

## Why Are Young Americans Less Committed to Faith?

A recent report by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life seems to validate concerns among Christian leaders that younger generations of Americans are losing the spiritual moorings that have helped keep their nation strong from its founding.

Analyzing the extent to which the religious views of America's "millennials" — adults between the ages of 18 and 29 — differ from those of adults over 30, the Pew Forum's "Religion Among the Millennials" report found that they are in general less affiliated with a particular religious faith than their over-30 counterparts, attend religious services less often, and say that religion is less important to them.



And while the beliefs of young adults about the existence of heaven, hell, and miracles, as well as their attitudes on prayer, are similar to those held by older adults, the report also found that they tend to be more tolerant of behaviors that previous generations found morally wrong, and have been more conditioned to accept an expanded role of government in their lives.

Among the main findings of the report:

- Twenty five percent of 18-to-29-year-old adults say they are religiously unaffiliated, describing themselves variously as "atheist," "agnostic," or "nothing in particular." By contrast, about 19 percent of adults in their 30s, 15 percent of those in their 40s, 14 percent of those in their 50s, and less than ten percent of those 60 and older identify themselves as unaffiliated.
- Only 45 percent of adults under age 30 say that religion is important to them, compared with almost 60 percent of adults 30 and older.
- Sixty-five percent of 18 to 29-year-olds say they are "absolutely" certain of the existence of God, compared with 73 percent of their 30-and-older counterparts.
- Only one-third of this group attend worship services every week, compared with 41 percent of adults 30 and older.
- Younger adults are as likely as older adults to say they believe in life after death (75 percent to 74 percent), heaven (74 percent for both groups), hell (62 percent to 59 percent), and miracles (78 percent versus 79 percent).

According to the report, while around 68 percent of young adults say they are members of a Christian denomination, 75 percent of these say they think there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their faith (compared to just over 65 percent of affiliated adults over 30 years of age).

Predictably, the report finds that only 27 percent of millennial adults say they read Scripture on a



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regular basis, compared to 36 percent of adults over 30. Similarly, less than half of young adults say they pray every day, compared to 56 percent of adults between 30 and 49, 61 percent of those in their 50s and early 60s, and 68 percent of adults 65 and older.

With such a disconnectedness to religious faith, it should come as no surprise that many young adults today are willing to accept what previous generations, more steeped in Judeo-Christian teachings, rejected as destructive behaviors. For example, the report finds that adults under age 30 are more likely than older adults to say that homosexuality should be accepted by society, and to support abortion at all levels. They are also far less likely to feel concerned that Hollywood is compromising the values of their society.

Perhaps one of the most alarming findings of the report is that young adults appear to have bought into the inevitability of intrusive government, and are more inclined than older adults to accept an increased role of government in their lives.

The findings of the Pew report appear to reflect the results of similar surveys conducted by both Catholic and evangelical researchers. For example, a recent survey by the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion found that over 80 percent of Catholic adults aged 18 to 30 think that “morals are relative” and that “there is no definite right or wrong for everybody.”

Similarly, a 2008 study by evangelical pollster George Barna found that half of all adults in America say that Christianity is just one of many faith options. The survey further found that while most Americans say their faith is more important than ever for their personal moral guidance, a large majority of them were willing to borrow from among many religious persuasions to patch together a faith structure with which they are comfortable. Barna found that unlike previous generations, over 70 percent of American adults today have jettisoned an organized approach to their faith and are more likely to come up with their own set of religious beliefs, with over 80 percent of young Americans under the age of 25 inclined to customize their faith.

In yet another survey, Barna found that young Americans age 16-29 have a more skeptical attitude toward Christianity than did people of the same age group just 10 years earlier. For example, 10 years ago most Americans outside the church had a favorable inclination toward the role of Christianity in shaping society’s mores. By contrast, Barna found that in today’s moral climate only 16 percent of non-Christians in their late teens and twenties have a “good impression” of Christianity. Even many young Christians share these negative perceptions of their faith, with half of young churchgoers saying they think Christianity is too judgmental, hypocritical, and political. One-third of young Christians feel that their faith is “old-fashioned” and “out of touch” with today’s world.

While it would be easy to place the blame for America’s spiritual slide at the door of its churches and places of worship, Barna noted research indicating that family dynamics have had a much higher impact on the priority young people place on God and faith in their lives. In his book *Revolutionary Parenting*, Barna explains that the most effective parents — the ones who raise children who have a strong personal faith, a focused life purpose, and a sense of personal responsibility toward God and others—are the ones who take “God’s words on life and family at face value,” and who “apply those words faithfully and consistently” in their interaction with their children.

Unlike the young adults the surveys say are prone to abandoning many of the core values of their faith, children raised by “revolutionary parents,” writes Barna, exhibit values that most experts would agree are crucial to a strong and stable society. Those values, Barna writes, include:



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- Believing that a top priority in life is knowing, loving, and serving God.
- Believing that faith in God is of the highest importance in life.
- Exhibiting a worldview founded upon a belief in absolute moral truth as defined in the Bible, the existence of God as the “all-powerful creator and ruler of the universe,” and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
- Placing a priority on active participation in a “vibrant community of faith” and in “consistent engagement in worship, prayer, Bible study, and spiritual accountability.”

Barna said that, overwhelmingly, the research on the changing role of faith in the lives of younger generations of Americans shows that “the faith principles and practices that a child absorbs by age thirteen boldly shapes their spirituality for the duration of their life.”

And the bottom line, concluded Barna, is this: “Parents have a greater impact on that process than anyone else.”



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