

Cultural Research Center



American Worldview Inventory 2021

Release #4: The National Religious Realignment: Identifying Dramatic Changes in Long-Term Faith Commitments

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One of the strengths of America for more than two centuries was the consistency of people's faith commitments. Not only did more than nine out of 10 Americans associate with the same faith (Christianity), but that alignment brought with it common views about morality, purpose, family, lifestyle, citizenship, and values.

But the dramatic erosion of shared Christian belief over the past 30 years is ushering in a number of rapid and radical changes in the relatively stable major religious alignments of America, according to new research from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

The latest findings from the [American Worldview Inventory 2021](#) identify a number of major shifts in the U.S. religious landscape, including:

- dramatic changes in the faith of American Hispanics, with a decrease in the number of Hispanic Catholics, accompanied by a sharp increase in Hispanic "Don'ts"—those who don't believe, don't know, or don't care if God exists;
- fast growth in Islamic, as well as Eastern and New Age religions;
- a consistent 30-year decline in both Christianity and confidence in religion;
- a breathtaking drop in four critical spiritual indicators: belief in God, belief in the Bible, recognition of salvation through Jesus Christ, and possession of a biblical worldview;
- and a surprising increase in belief in reincarnation, even among Christians.

Hispanic Faith

For the past several decades Hispanics have been a major growth segment for the Catholic Church in America. A large majority of the Hispanic community has traditionally described themselves as Catholic. But as Hispanics have succumbed to the same acculturation pressures as other people groups in the United States, that church loyalty has significantly diminished.

An examination of the church affiliation of Hispanics shows that their relationship to Catholicism is rapidly shifting. In 1991, 59% of Hispanics in the U.S. self-identified as Catholics. That figure dropped a bit over the next decade, declining to 54% in 2001. However, there was nearly double the level of decline over the following decade, dipping below the 50-percent mark to just 45% in 2011. An even more substantial dip has occurred in the past 10 years, falling to just 28% in 2021. In other words, the proportion of Hispanic adults in the United States who claim to be Catholic has been sliced in half, from 59% to 28% in the last 30 years.

Where are Hispanics going? While there has been a minor uptick in adherence to non-Christian faiths, those allegiances reflect only about one out of 10 Hispanics (9%). And the nearly 300 Protestant denominations in America have failed to attract wayward Hispanic Catholics, with Protestant adherence also dropping slightly since 2001 (from 35% in 2001 and 37% in 2011 to just 32% in 2021).

The big gains have been among the Don'ts—i.e. people who say they don't know, don't care, or don't believe that God exists. A mere 3% of Hispanics fell into the Don'ts category in 1991, but that tripled by 2001 (to 9%), grew by another one-third over the next decade (12% in 2011) but then exploded to nearly one-third of Hispanics by 2021 (31%). That means the proportion of Don'ts among Hispanics has blossomed tenfold in the last three decades.

The Shifting Religious Allegiances of Hispanics				
Faith Affiliation	1991	2001	2011	2021
Catholic	59%	54%	45%	28%
Protestant	30	35	37	32
Non-Christian faith	8	2	6	9
Don'ts	3	9	12	31
Source: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2021</i> , Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University; OmniPoll™ (1991, 2001, 2011), Barna Group, Ventura, CA.				

Fastest-growing Religious Faiths

The expansion of the Don'ts among Hispanics is indicative of how rapidly that segment is growing across America. While one out of 10 U.S. adults qualified for that category in 1991 and again in 2001, the segment nudged up by just a couple more percentage points by 2011. That means the incredible growth of that category has taken place in the past decade, with the number of Don'ts nationwide nearly tripling from 12% in 2011 to 34% in 2021.

Who is responsible for that rapid and substantial growth? One of the leading segments is the Millennial generation (currently ages 18 through 36). The *American Worldview Inventory 2021*, an annual survey of Americans' worldview conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, reveals that 43% of Millennials are Don'ts—the highest of any adult generation in the country.

Other population segments that have gravitated faster than most toward rejecting the existence of God include political liberals (49%), people who are not registered to vote (40%), and residents of the Northeast (40%) or California (40%). Not surprisingly, people who draw heavily from non-biblical worldviews also qualify as Don'ts—i.e., those who often rely on Marxism (58%), Nihilism (70%), Secular Humanism (85%), and Postmodernism (87%).

But the *American Worldview Inventory 2021* also identified two other rapidly growing faith segments. One of those is Islam. While the Muslim faith had virtually no presence in the United States prior to the early 1990s (less than one-half of one percent of adults affiliated with Islam in 1991), that proportion has jumped in the past decade to nearly 3%. While that percentage is still small in comparison to several other faiths, the growth rate of Islam in America has exceeded even that of the Don'ts during the last decade.

In addition, Eastern religions (such as Buddhism and Hinduism) have also experienced resurgence in recent years. Presently, nearly 5% of adults associate with an Eastern or New Age religion. While that is more than double the proportion measured a decade ago, it is also indicative of the current search for alternatives to Christianity. Some that increase is also attributable to the continued expansion of the Asian population in America, now estimated to exceed 5% of the aggregate population.

Christianity's Status Has Changed

So where does Christianity stand in the religious mix of the nation? More than 90% of Americans claimed to be Christians as recently as 1980. Since that time there has been a steady decline in self-identification with the nation's foundational faith. By 1990 the proportion had dropped to eight out of 10. That level remained consistent until after the turn of the millennium, when the decline began to gain momentum. By 2010 three out of four adults claimed to be Christian. Currently, just under two out of three make the same claim.

Confidence in religion has shown a corresponding decline during that period. In the 1970s two-thirds of Americans had a high level of confidence in religion. The decline in such confidence began in the mid-1980s—the same time that the notable drop in alignment with Christianity started. By 2000 confidence in religion had fallen to 56%, and the drop has continued to this day. Today barely four out of 10 adults have a high degree of confidence in religion.

Perhaps the most telling reflection of the decline of Christianity as the preferred faith in America is demonstrated by the concurrent declines in a quartet of faith-related measures that veteran researcher George Barna has been tracking since the late 1970s. The shift in people's answers to these measures is breathtaking.

- Belief in the existence of God as the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the universe who still rules the world today—86% in 1991 to 46% in 2021.
- Belief that the Bible is the accurate and reliable word of God—70% in 1991; 41% in 2021.
- Belief that when they die the respondent will go to Heaven only because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior—36% in 1991; 30% in 2021 (note: this measured as high as 45% and was 39% in 2011).
- Possess a biblical worldview—12% in 1995; 6% in 2021.

Significant Changes in Four Critical Spiritual Indicators				
Indicator	1991	2001	2011	2021
Hold an orthodox, biblical view of God	86%	72%	67%	46%
Believe the Bible is the accurate word of God	70	60	62	41
Believe they will go to heaven solely due to confession of sins, acceptance of Jesus Christ as their personal savior	36	41	39	30
Possess a biblical worldview	12*	n/a	n/a	6
Source: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2021</i> , Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University; OmniPoll™ (1991, 2001, 2011), Barna Group, Ventura, CA.				

Life After Death

The data described above note the decline in the proportion of Americans who can be described as born-again Christians based on their beliefs (as opposed to the unreliable self-identification as such). During the past three decades, that statistic has plummeted from a high of 45% to the current 30%. (Note: this measurement does not use the term “born again” in the question.)

If Americans are less inclined to embrace Jesus Christ as their savior and rely on their own admission and confession of sins and His grace for their salvation, then what do they believe about life after death?

One of the most surprising shifts has been the renewed interest in reincarnation. After a flirtation with that belief in the psychedelic 1970s, reincarnation barely registered as an eternal outcome in national surveys throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium. However, the past decade has ignited a new following for Eastern religious thought and practices, perhaps sparked by yoga, meditation, and the greater accessibility to information about Eastern beliefs and practices facilitated by new technologies.

Currently, 9% of adults believe they will be reincarnated. That proportion is likely to continue growing, given the twin outcomes of a decline in Christian beliefs and the fact that four out of 10 Americans (39%) believe that reincarnation is a real possibility for them. There is a solid likelihood of continued growth in the acceptance of reincarnation since that belief is most heavily supported by several key population segments:

- Our youngest adults, Millennials (51%)
- Our fastest-growing racial group, Hispanics (54%)
- Our parents of young children (47%)
- Residents of our largest states, which have greater influence on the nation (43%)
- LGBTQ adults, who are among the most influence-driven segments (65%)
- Liberals, currently the most politically-potent ideological segment (47%)

Amazingly, substantial proportions of people associated with Christianity embrace the possibility of reincarnation. For instance, one out of four (24%) theological born-again Christians—i.e., people whose beliefs lead them to an assurance that they, personally, will experience an eternity in God’s presence only because of their confession of sins and acceptance of salvation through the death, resurrection, and saving grace of Jesus Christ—accept reincarnation as a possibility. In addition, more than one-third of all self-identified Christians (36%) also believe that reincarnation is a real possibility for them.

It is relevant to point out that Americans generally reject the idea of going to Hell, or some place of eternal torment, after their time on earth ends. Currently, just 2% of Americans believe they will experience Hell after they die on earth. That figure has fluctuated between 1% and 2% for the past 40 years.

Restoring Christian Vitality

The data reported by the Cultural Research Center moved its Director of Research, George Barna, to recommend that ministry leaders consider a new mindset about ministry in America.

“The United States has become one of the largest and most important mission fields in the world,” Barna said. “We are faced with a young-adult population that is breaking the established patterns; they do not embrace many of the core beliefs and behaviors that characterized those who came before them.”

Barna explained, “This new America we see emerging is radically different—demographically, politically, relationally and spiritually. It is a young, non-white, mobile population. This group is largely indifferent to the United States, and is demonstrably skeptical of the nation’s history, foundations, traditions, and ways of life. They are technologically advanced, sexually unrestrained, emotionally unpredictable, and a spiritual hybrid. Christian ministry as practiced for the last five decades will not be effective with this unique population.”

Barna suggested some new avenues for ministry to pursue.

“Because a worldview is developed when people are young, it is imperative that churches focus on and invest most heavily in reaching children and equipping their parents,” he said. “Because the Bible is increasingly rejected as a trustworthy and relevant document of life principles, we must re-establish the reasons for its value and reliability.”

Barna continued, “Given that most young Americans view success as whatever produces happiness or satisfaction, we will have to address the emptiness and inadequacies of a life devoted to self and our fluid emotions. And without a solid foundation of truth upon which choices can be made, a society is doomed to hardships, failures, and conflict. In the person of Jesus Christ and through the pages of the Bible, absolute moral truths are knowable and can be applied to facilitate a successful and meaningful life.”

The Arizona Christian University professor also explained that many of the approaches now relied upon by Christian ministries—and especially by churches—may be inadequate to impact the new population that needs to be reached with God’s truths and principles.

“Typical church services and programs are not likely to minister to people in the way they did in the past,” he cautioned. “Reconsidering what it takes to facilitate disciples in such a different environment is a necessary step in the reimagining process.”

According to Barna, “Successful ministries will need to foster bold and creative leadership. Giving such leaders the latitude to redefine practices without abandoning biblical principles is one of the greatest contributions believers can provide to Christian leaders. As our nation navigates this period of chaos and turbulence, allowing Christian leaders the latitude to test new ministry strategies and tactics will go a long way toward helping America return to Christ.”

About the Research

The *American Worldview Inventory 2021 (AWVI)* is an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over). Begun as an annual tracking study in 2020, the assessment is based on several dozen worldview-related questions drawn from eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

AWVI 2021 is the first-ever national survey of biblical and competing worldviews. It was undertaken in February 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of indeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity.

The data for 1991, 2001, and 2011 are from representative national surveys conducted by the Barna Group, the research company founded by George Barna in 1984 and sold in 2009. The Barna Group has continued as an independent, non-partisan research organization since the sale, providing research-based insights related to faith and culture.

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school's campus in Glendale, Arizona, in the Phoenix metropolitan area. In addition to conducting the annual *American Worldview Inventory*, CRC also introduced the *ACU Student Worldview Inventory (SWVI)* in 2020. That survey is administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, and a final administration among students just prior to their graduation. The *ACU Student Worldview Inventory* enables the University to track the worldview development of its student body and to make changes to that process as recommended by the research. The Cultural Research Center also conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to transforming American culture with biblical truth.

CRC is guided by George Barna, Director of Research, and Tracy Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity but serves with a variety of theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. Access to the results from past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, are available at www.culturalresearchcenter.com. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.arizonachristian.edu.