

## Cultural Research Center

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### Indifference to God, Jesus and the Bible Drives Millennials' Faith

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research

[Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University](#)

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The Millennial generation is introducing a diminished, redefined role for religious faith in our nation.

New research shows that younger Americans are deeply ambivalent about religious faith and attach little importance to the practices and truths of Christianity compared to generations before them, according to a new report from George Barna and the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

Much like the syncretistic worldview adopted by a majority of their generation, the Millennial faith profile reflects a mixed bag of religious beliefs and behaviors—surprisingly, often embraced under the banner of Christianity.

Gone are the days when Americans proudly proclaimed themselves to be people of faith, whose values and lifestyles were built upon the bedrock of biblical principles.

Instead, research from the groundbreaking report, [\*Millennials in America: New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence\*](#), shows that Millennials are swelling the nation's fastest-growing "faith" group—the "Don'ts"—those who don't know, don't care or don't believe that God exists—despite their claims of being Christian.

This most recent report looks specifically at Millennial faith and worldview and is the third in-depth analysis of findings from *Millennials in America*. The report's generational analysis, based on a national survey of adults born between 1984 and 2002, identifies a number of troubling trends in the faith of young adults:

- The population segment is generally ambivalent toward religious faith. Religious beliefs and experiences have much less influence on their life choices than those religious elements had in the lives of prior generations.
- The biblical foundations and definitions of Christianity are widely compromised or outright rejected by the younger generation, despite their tendency to refer to themselves as "Christians."

- Despite a dramatic decline in belief in a transcendent, sovereign God, atheism has not been widely embraced by Millennials to fill that vacuum.
- Millennials place far less importance on church-based religious activity in their lives than previous generations.
- Concern about the afterlife has been replaced by an emphasis on living in the moment and making the most of this present life.
- Truth, a pivotal concept for the Christian faith, is viewed as the product of emotion rather than fact, and is seen as flexible rather than predictable in the eyes of most young adults.

### **Ambivalence toward Christianity**

The research shows that roughly two out of every three Millennials (65%) say they are Christian. That proportion is similar to the national average (currently 69%).

The biggest generational difference, though, is that among Millennials the label “Christian” is not a statement of commitment to the namesake (Jesus Christ) or to embracing biblical beliefs and principles. Rather, that term has taken on the connotation of being a good person, regardless of religious beliefs.

Recasting Christianity as a generic term for a positive life stance is not because Millennials have a problem with Jesus Christ—most of them they don’t. The research found that six out of 10 Millennials (59%) hold a positive view of Jesus. A majority of those pro-Jesus individuals described their view of Him as “very positive.”

In fact, the survey discovered that a mere one-sixth (16%) of the generation harbors a negative view of Jesus Christ, and only 6% have a “very negative” view of the Son of God. That’s nearly four young adults with a favorable view of Jesus to every one respondent who expressed an unfavorable perception of Jesus.

The survey did reveal that a surprisingly large share of that youngest adult generation—23%—have not yet formed a substantive opinion of Jesus. That is an unexpectedly large proportion, considering Jesus is one of the most compelling and studied people in human history.

To some extent the generation’s shifting views relate to perceptions of the Bible and the Christian Church. Just half of Millennials have a favorable impression of the Bible (51%) and the Christian faith (50%).

Part of the arms-length relationship with Christianity is apparently related to the generation’s distrust of pastors, its perception that many Christian individuals are hypocrites, and questions about the relevance of the ancient religion to a postmodern society.

Favorability Ratings of Four Religious Terms							
	Positive Opinion				Negative Opinion		
	Very	Mostly	A Little	Neutral Opinion	A Little	Mostly	Very
<b>Jesus Christ</b>	39%	12%	8%	17%	6%	4%	6%
<b>The Bible</b>	29	12	10	21	8	5	9
<b>Christianity</b>	26	15	9	19	9	5	10
<b>Atheism</b>	8	7	10	31	11	8	12

Source: *Millennials in America*, conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, August 2021; based on a national sample of 600 Millennials.

The report also demonstrated that young adults be slow to embrace Christianity as a comprehensive and coherent philosophy of life. An [earlier report](#) from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University noted that only 4% of Millennials possess a biblical worldview. This latest report looking specifically at Millennial faith and worldview provides more detail regarding how profoundly ambivalent the segment is toward Christianity as a belief system.

Just one-half of all young adults (52%) indicated they are “deeply committed” to practicing their religious faith. Among those whose faith is Christianity, the statistic was a more respectable 63%, with those associated with the Protestant church equally as likely as those aligned with the Catholic church to claim such a level of commitment. Millennials who associate with a non-Christian faith are slightly more likely (67%) to indicate deep commitment to their faith of choice.

Some degree of the abandonment or rejection of Christianity by young adults flows from their view of Christian leadership, especially as represented by church pastors.

The *Millennials in America* report describes the low level of trust that Millennials have in Christian pastors. Of the nine types of cultural influencers evaluated in the survey, barely half of the Millennials participating in the survey (54%) said they trust Christian pastors to do what is right or to tell the truth at least sometimes.

More than one-third of those surveyed (37%) said they would not afford pastors even a minimal level of trust, claiming to trust pastors “not too often” or “never.” More specifically, the study revealed that only one in four young adults (26%) said they would “always or almost always trust pastors of Christian churches to tell the truth or to do what is right.”

In other words, three out of four Millennials lack consistent trust in the words and decisions of Christian pastors.

If nothing else, that information suggests that pastors would be wise to reconsider their practices and reputation. The data for all nine of the cultural influencers tested among Millennials shows that the average level of trust afforded to the other eight types of influencers is well above that of Christian pastors.

The generation's lackadaisical attitude toward Christianity is reflected in its limited engagement with Christian practices. After factoring in the effects of COVID on faith practices, Millennials remain less likely than older adults to participate in common Christian practices.

Evaluating what they had undertaken in the past month, just four out of 10 young adults had attended a Christian church service or worship event (43%); spent at least an hour reading from the Bible (40%); or donated money to a church, religious center, or faith-based organization (also 40%). Among older adults, six out of 10 (or more) had engaged in such religious activities in the past month.

### **“Cancel Culture” Cancels Faith?**

Millennials' relative disinterest in religious faith fits the young adult cultural ethos of “canceling” institutions, ideologies and individuals that don't fit with their personal expectations and perspectives.

They also do not get bogged down in the details and distinctives related to faith systems that have characterized the thinking of older Americans, with Millennials instead opting out of traditional religion altogether.

A record-breaking proportion of young adults (27%) portray themselves as not associating with any religious faith or tradition. In fact, as if to emphasize their disinterest or ignorance related to the differences between religious faiths, three-quarters of the generation (74%) believes that all religious faiths are of equal value.

Less than one out of every three Millennials (29%) deems their religious faith to be something they would die for. Placed in context, their faith emerged as one of the life elements they are least willing to sacrifice their life to save or protect.

Their ambivalence toward faith was also evident in relation to the changes they would most like to make in their life. Specifically, they were least likely to pursue changes related to their faith or religious life.

Overall, less than one-third of Millennials included at least one faith-related change to their top life-change priorities. Developing a better relationship with God was the most commonly mentioned faith-related upgrade, but it was mentioned by just one out of seven Millennials (14%). There were few other faith-oriented changes identified by the group.

## God and Atheism

It would be reasonable to assume that if young adults are charting a new faith pathway, atheism might be at the center of the new trajectory. The current popularity of several worldviews that reject the existence of God—most notably Marxism, Secular Humanism and Nihilism—would seem to heighten the probability of a growth in atheism.

But that is not the case. Although more and more Millennials fit within the “godless” niche, atheism is less attractive to them than agnosticism and outright indifference.

Attitudinally, atheism is not a winner. Only one-quarter of them (25%) have a positive view of atheism, compared to 31% who either have a negative view or no opinion about atheism.

In short, Millennials boast the lowest level of understanding of the traditional, biblical view of God (i.e., the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect and just creator of the universe who rules that universe today). Barely one-third of them (35%) have adopted that belief, the lowest level of any generation ever recorded.

Various Beliefs about God or A Higher Power	
God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect and just creator of the universe who rules that universe today	35%
A higher power may exist, but nobody really knows for certain	25
God refers to the total realization of personal, human potential or a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach	12
There are many gods, each with different purposes and authority	8
Everyone is god	5
There is no such thing as God	5
Don't know	11
Source: <i>Millennials in America</i> , conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, August 2021; based on a national sample of 600 Millennials.	

As several recent reports from the Cultural Research Center have noted, the fastest-growing faith segment in the nation is the “Don’ts,” defined as people who don’t know if God exists, don’t know if God exists, or don’t care that God exists.

No population segment is fueling the growth of the Don’ts more than Millennials, with 41% falling within this category. However, the growth of Don’ts in this generation has come primarily from increases among those who are either agnostic (i.e., nobody really knows if a divine being or supreme power exists) or those who are indifferent to the whole matter of a divine being.

Perhaps the most eye-opening realization is that there are now more Millennials in the Don'ts category than there are young adults who hold the traditional, biblical view of God.

American Millennials also add to the widely ignored growth of Eastern religious beliefs regarding the existence of a divine being or power. These religions propose a range of ideas about such a higher power or universal force. Among those are the idea that every human being is divine (which 5% of Millennials believe) and that “God” refers to each of us reaching our full potential or a state of higher consciousness (believed by 12%). Some eastern traditions also suggest there are many different gods or deities (8%).

Cumulatively, these non-Western perspectives reflect the views of one-quarter of all Millennials—a proportion that is both increasing and approaching the number of those who believe in the traditional, biblical view of God.

### **The Afterlife**

One significant realization concerning the religious turbulence in America is that the ideas of sin and the forgiveness of sin are not given much credence or consideration by Millennials.

Christian churches have historically focused on the fall of humankind from God's acceptance and redemption of humanity through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. The acknowledgment of sin and the acceptance of Jesus as a personal savior have been taught as being integral to an individual's entry to Heaven.

However, many young Americans neither believe that Jesus is the central figure in determining the nature of our eternal destination nor worry about the existence and nature of an afterlife.

Based on the annual *American Worldview Inventory* conducted by the Cultural Research Center, only 2% of American adults believe that they will go to Hell, or some place of eternal torment, after they die. Fewer individuals are accepting the idea that they must acknowledge their sinfulness to God and embrace Jesus Christ as their savior. In fact, more adults believe they hold the key to their own eternal consequences than contend that Jesus Christ is their key to an eternity spent outside of Hell.

Millennials are leading the way in this new spiritual pathway. Only one out of every six Millennials (16%) believes that after they die they will enter Heaven solely because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Among living adults who preceded Millennials, twice that number has embraced Christ as their means to salvation.

### **The New View of Truth**

The new research also shows a staggering corrosion of the Christian principle of Truth. Moral relativism is alive and well in America, and Millennials are its champion.

Close to six out of 10 Millennials (56%) argue that identifying moral truth is up to each individual and that there are no moral absolutes that apply to everyone all the time. Today's young adults are more likely to reject than accept the notion of moral absolutes by a 5:2 ratio (56% vs. 22%).

To most Millennials, morality is conditional. The Cultural Research Center's surveys among young adults also show that they determine truth based on a fluid combination of personal emotions, past experiences and the advice of other people. A small minority of the generation turns to the Bible as their primary source of moral guidance.

## **America, Faith and the Future**

The role of faith in the United States is woven throughout the nation's history. For more than two centuries it has been an integral part of who we are as a nation, as well as a critical indicator of where our nation is going and the quality of life we may hope for.

Unfortunately, "canceling" churches and faith has become an accepted part of American society during the past decade. That practice has been accepted and normalized by COVID.

According to George Barna, author of the Millennial research, "Allowing such a dramatic shift to occur is producing major upheavals in institutions, attitudes, values, lifestyle, personal relationships, and even mental health."

"By 'canceling' God, we seek to empower ourselves and replace His authority with our own through feelings, human rationale or expedience as viable justifications for unbiblical choices," Barna noted. "By denying His existence we alleviate any responsibility to a Creator for our actions. Eliminating God liberates us to become moral free agents with no higher calling, no slate of moral imperatives or guidelines, and no eternal consequences for our temporal choices."

"But in the end, because we were not created for, nor have the constituency to handle that responsibility, we are left confused, anxious, scared and alone," explained the veteran researcher.

Unfortunately, these new faith practices have consequences for young adults.

"Millennials are struggling to make sense of both this world and the next. They live in the crosshairs of cultural influencers whose extreme messages about independence and self-reliance conflict with the biblical themes of Christ-dependence and personal spiritual insufficiency," Barna explained. "The documented growth of angst and turmoil experienced by Millennials is an unavoidable result of denying God's existence and sovereignty. Sadly, we have set up our young adults for failure."

Barna sees the challenge facing Millennial's faith as a worldview issue.

“Given the research showing that 24 out of every 25 Millennials do not possess a biblical worldview, the most logical solution is to help them understand the role of worldview and then to embrace the biblical worldview,” he said.

“Their current reliance upon syncretism—the patchwork perspective on life drawn from competing and sometimes contradictory ideas and often muddled and misguided viewpoints—is detrimental to their well-being,” the Arizona Christian University professor continued.

“If we care about them, we will commit to helping them understand and adopt proven biblical truths about life. Anything short of that kind of decision-making reorientation will simply be ineffective, stop-gap measures doomed to fail.”

The final sections of the *Millennials in America* report contain prescriptions for improving the situation. Approaching the situation as a worldview crisis, the report lays out a multi-part strategy that involves individuals, institutions, churches, and families. The report is available to download, at no charge, [here](#).

### **About the Research**

The *Millennials in America* report is based on research developed and implemented in August 2021 by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University on behalf of Foundations of Freedom. The online survey was conducted among a national sample of 600 Millennials, defined as people born from 1984 through 2002 (ages 18 to 36 at the time of the survey). The survey questionnaire contained 71 questions, resulting in a median survey length of 17 minutes. Survey respondents were promised anonymity and confidentiality. Some of the questions and data appearing in this study originated in the *American Worldview Inventory*, an annual nationwide assessment of worldview conducted by the Cultural Research Center.

### **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. The institute annually conducts the *American Worldview Inventory*, a nationwide assessment of the worldview of American adults. CRC also developed the ACU Student Worldview Inventory, a survey administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, plus a final administration undertaken among students just prior to their graduation, tracking the worldview development of its student body. 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 facilitating the positive transformation of American culture with biblical truth.



The Cultural Research Center is guided by George Barna, Director of Research, and Tracy Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity. It works in cooperation with a variety of Bible-centric, theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. The results of past CRC surveys, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, can be accessed at [www.culturalresearchcenter.com](http://www.culturalresearchcenter.com). Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at [www.arizonachristian.edu](http://www.arizonachristian.edu).