

AlbertMohler.com

American Christianity and the “Culture of Customization”

Tuesday, March 11, 2008



Researchers are beginning to look at the data and analysis from the massive [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#) undertaken by the [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#) — and some of the insights are worth noting.

The study revealed big changes in American religious life, with the Protestant majority disappearing, millions of Americans “switching” faiths, and the number of “nothing in particular” responses rising.

Writing in Monday’s edition of [USA Today](#), Stephen Prothero of Boston University suggests that the data indicate a fundamental transformation of American religion. Chair of the university’s department of religion, Prothero writes:

The tale I take away from this study is that shifts in the political and moral winds are transforming American religion. Many believe that the Founders separated church and state in order to save the federal government from the interference of overzealous ministers. Not so. The purpose of the First Amendment’s establishment clause — which prohibits the federal government from passing laws that favor any one religion (atheism included) — was to safeguard religion against the encroachment of politics. And this new survey suggests that those safeguards are, well, going the way of the freak show.

Prothero ties this to the rise of the “nones” in the study — those who claimed no religious affiliation. As he explains:

The key subplot here is the rise of “nones,” a category growing faster than any other religious group. Of all adults in the USA, 16% say they are religiously unaffiliated, while 7% were raised that way. Moreover, 25% of younger Americans (ages 18-29) report no religious affiliation at all.

It is important to emphasize that this march of the “nones” is by no means beating the drums for the old secularization thesis, which posited that as societies embraced modernization they would shun God. This is because many “nones” are quite religious. In fact, many Americans refuse to affiliate with any religious organization not because they do not believe in God but because they believe in God so fervently that they cannot imagine any human institution capturing the mysteries of the divine. In this study, only about a quarter of all “nones” call themselves atheists or agnostics. In other surveys, about half the unaffiliated typically affirm the Christian God.

This is a very significant insight. Prothero’s argument is that the “nones” are not really committed to nothing — just to no particular system or organized religion. Instead, they are “spiritual but not religious” types. He adds that this option “among my Boston University students at least, seems as popular as the smoothie stand in the student union.”

Adding to his argument, he suggests two reasons why the “nones” are rising in numbers: “a decline in the stigma of being a religious free agent, and an increase in the stigma of being a church member.”

He cites Darren Sherkat of Southern Illinois University, who argues that social constraints once caused Americans to have “overconsumed religion.” With those social constraints gone or severely weakened, citizens do not fear looking bad if known to be unaffiliated. Conversely, others are turned off by the scandals of organized religion. The “status gap” has

disappeared. Increasing numbers of parents raise their children without any contact with organized religion — and they fear no stigma or social cost.

On the other hand, Prothero also pointed to the strength of evangelical Christianity:

Another story buried in the data of this new survey is the power of evangelical Protestantism, and particularly non-denominational churches. Of those surveyed, 44% called themselves “born again” or “evangelical” Christians, and among religious options non-denominational Protestantism is one of the fastest growing.

This story of the revenge of the evangelicals might seem at odds with the tale of the rise of the “nones,” but the impulse underlying them is the same. The USA is rapidly becoming a culture of customization. People want to write their own marriage vows and have tailor-made funerals. They gravitate toward religious options that are more personal and less institutional. In this respect, the “unaffiliated” and the “non-denominational” Protestant are cut from the same cloth.

The story behind the numbers of this latest survey is not that religion is in trouble. It is that religion is morphing into something new. Faith is becoming more political. But it is becoming more personal at the same time.

The insights offered by both Prothero and Sherkat are of significant interest to those concerned with the future of American Christianity. The argument about the “culture of customization” is especially apt, and evangelicalism as a movement is often complicit in this development. The “Culture of Customization” invites persons to create their own personalized faith complete with their own personalized beliefs and doctrines. When evangelical churches facilitate this process, the Gospel itself is lost.

The Christian faith is a system of saving truth — not a catalogue of options.

