

Recent Surveys Reveal Shifting Worldviews About God and Religion

The Wired Word for the Week of June 6, 2021

In the News

The United States is undergoing a "seismic worldview shift driven by younger Americans," according to the American Worldview Inventory 2021 (AWVI 2021), conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

The annual survey assesses the worldviews of four generations: Millennials (born 1984-2002), Gen Xers (born 1965-1983), Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), and Builders (born 1927-1945).

An earlier report from AWVI 2021 reported that all four generations (or 88% of all Americans, across the generations) are inclined to syncretism, selecting their individual beliefs and values from a philosophical buffet of possible choices to create often incoherent mash-ups upon which to build their lifestyles and behavior.

But according to sociologist Dr. George Barna, Director of Research at the center, "the Millennial generation in particular, seems committed to living without God, without the Bible, and without Christian churches as foundations in either their personal life or within American society." Nearly half of millennials say they "Don't know, care or believe that God exists."

They are much less likely than previous generations to believe that:

- God is the all-knowing, all-powerful, just creator and sustainer of the universe.
- God is involved in people's lives.
- all people are designed to know, love and serve God with all their heart, mind, strength and soul.
- human beings were created in God's image but are fallen creatures in need of redemption by Jesus Christ.
- Satan is a real, influential being.

Only 16% of Millennials and 26% of Gen Xers, compared to 41% of Baby Boomers and 39% of Builders believe that they will go to heaven when they die because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior.

Millennials are more open than are previous generations to karma, guidance through horoscopes, the possibility of reincarnation and evolution. They are also more likely than older generations to find premarital sex, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, lying, cheating on taxes, defrauding lenders, seeking revenge against people who have wronged them and speeding morally acceptable.

Millennials were also much less likely than people from older generations to:

- embrace the Bible as their primary source of moral guidance.
- seek to follow God's will.
- ask for God's forgiveness for their sins.
- be deeply committed to practicing their faith.
- identify as a Christian.

- praise and worship God weekly.
- hold to the Golden Rule by treating others as they would like to be treated.

The demographic cohort born after the Millennials, called Gen Zers, is moving ever closer to moral relativism as the "majority opinion," with 65% of the generation holding to the belief that many religions can lead to eternal life, according to a Barna Group study from last summer.

In addition, three out of four Gen Zers "strongly or somewhat agree" that what is "morally right and wrong changes over time, based on society." Only one in 10 "actually think that objective truth and morality really exist and don't change depending upon people's desires or feelings or society over time, but [that] there is an ultimate reference point, there is an ultimate anchor to moral and spiritual reality," said Jonathan Morrow, director of cultural engagement and student discipleship at Impact 360 Institute, which partnered with the Barna Group study.

Morrow said Gen Z needs to cultivate the skills to move beyond personal feelings, preferences and experiences to discover what is "ultimate. Just because I believe or feel a certain way, it doesn't mean reality is that way."

More on this story can be found at these links:

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

[43% of Millennials 'Don't Know, Don't Care, Don't Believe' God Exists: Study. Christian Post](#)

[What Is a Worldview? Ligonier](#)

[Differences in Worldviews: Which Do You Choose? Connections Online](#)

[Op-Ed: Why America's Record Godlessness Is Good News for the Nation. Los Angeles Times](#)

Applying the News Story

"It is hard to imagine a louder, clearer and more direct challenge to the future of the Christian faith in the United States," George Barna warned. "If Christian churches, pastors, schools and individuals believe that a biblical Christian faith is important -- not just for themselves but also for our nation and the world beyond it - time is running out to aggressively and strategically act on that belief."

Given Barna's challenge, we would do well to ask whether or not the changing worldviews are cause for alarm and call for drastic action. If so, what kind of action on the part of individual Christians and the collective Church would be appropriate and effective? And how should such action be implemented? If not, how should individual Christians and the collective Church respond to the American Worldview Inventory 2021 and surveys like it?

The Big Questions

1. What happens to faith when we start with the assumption that:

- there are no answers?
- there are multiple answers, all equally valid?
- there are multiple answers, none valid or satisfying?
- there is only one answer that is valid and satisfying?
- there is only one answer that is valid, but it is unsatisfying?

2. How free do you feel to question your church's teachings? Do you think questioning the tenets of your faith is good, or bad? Explain your answer.
3. Throughout church history, secular and religious authorities have not always favored or supported those who wished to follow the teachings of Christ. What lessons might we learn from Christ-followers who faced outright hostility and persecution in the past that might help us hold on to our faith in an era when a biblical framework of thinking is no longer the accepted, dominant worldview?
4. What are the ramifications of changing views on religion for churches going forward? How do you feel about these developments? Do you feel fear, anxiety, hope, excitement, or something else? How does the gospel of Jesus the Christ address those feelings?
5. How can Christians confidently express certainty about the tenets of their faith without arrogance?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Samuel 2:12-13, 17

Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD or for the duties of the priests to the people. ... Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD; for they treated the offerings of the LORD with contempt. (For context, read 2:12-17.)

Children do not necessarily adopt the faith of their parents, or, if they do, do not necessarily adhere to it as faithfully as did their parents. And the faithfulness of the parents is not necessarily a predictor of how faith-filled the next generation will be.

We see many examples of this in the Bible. Consider Eli, the priest of God at Shiloh during the time of the judges. He, according to the biblical account, was a godly man, but his two sons, who also served in the priesthood, did not follow his example. Eli tried to get them to straighten up, but they refused his correction, and never did change their ways.

It must have been a comfort to Eli when Hannah brought her young son Samuel to serve as his assistant, for Samuel was faithful and obedient to God all his life.

Yet Samuel, who succeeded Eli in the priesthood and as a judge in Israel, also had sons who were a disappointment to their father. When they became judges over Israel, they "did not follow in [Samuel's] ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice." Their behavior led the Israelites to ask Samuel to anoint a king to govern them instead of his sons (1 Samuel 8:1-5).

Jesus told another story about a father and his two sons, both of whom fail to live up to expectations. The younger son values his inheritance and the pleasure he can gain from it more than he values his father (Luke 15:11-14). The elder son is full of anger, resentment and a sense of entitlement (Luke 15:25-30). It's hard to blame the father for the attitudes and actions of his sons.

Values, character, and even faith, we are told, start in the home, so if our kids' values, character or faith turn out differently from what we wanted for them, then who's to blame? Yet, while the kind of parenting children receive is an important factor in their development, it is not the whole story.

Questions: To what degree are parents responsible for the state of their children's religious commitment? What other factors influence a child's social, physical and spiritual development? How should parents hold

themselves accountable to raise their children in the ways of the Lord? How can the church best assist parents as they seek to fulfill their child-rearing responsibilities?

Judges 2:10-12

Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. (For context, read 2:6-13.)

Before he died, Joshua called on the people of Israel to renew their commitment to the covenant with God, and they did. "The people worshiped the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel" (v. 7). But after Joshua and his generation died, the next generation broke covenant with the Lord, abandoning him and worshiping other gods.

Generally speaking, Joshua's generation was faithful to God and generally speaking, the next generation was not. Nonetheless, there must have been a whole lot of Joshua's cohorts who felt guilty, wondering what they had done wrong in parenting their children that so many of them did not latch on to the faith they themselves taught and held dear.

We have every reason to believe that Joshua's generation practiced their faith in their homes and they took their children to worship in the tabernacle. So the new generation was not lacking in information about God or the covenant. Yet they did not "know the Lord" in the same way the previous generation had known him. Actually, the Hebrew verb translated "to know" is the same one that was used to denote sexual intimacy as in a marriage. That later generation, the verb is telling us, had no intimacy and personal knowledge of God, no closeness or loyalty as in a marriage.

Joshua's generation "had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel." They had been born in the wilderness, had seen the fiery cloud and pillar of God's leadership, had eaten the miraculously provided manna, had witnessed God's help in defeating the peoples who tried to stop them, had crossed the Jordan River on dry land as God rolled back the waters, had seen the walls of Jericho tumble before them and so on. The next generation had surely been told about those things, but there's a big difference between participating in the events and hearing about them secondhand. It's very hard to transmit enthusiasm and commitment by retelling alone.

We who profess the faith today, whether we are parents or not, should do all within our power to pass our Christianity on to the next generation. We should plant seeds of faith and nurture seedlings of faith along. Congregations must come alongside parents to support them in their marriages and parenting responsibilities. Churches can also seek ways to mentor and encourage young people in the community who may not have access to biblical teaching or positive role models. Yet, in the end, the next generation will ultimately make their own faith decisions.

Questions: How would you characterize the roles of God, parents or caregivers, and children in the faith development of children? With regard to the faith development of children and youth, how might it help parents and other caregivers to remember what Jesus said in John 6:44 ("No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me")?

What advice would you give parents, teachers, children's workers, youth workers and other caregivers of younger people on how to provide guidance in the ways of God without attempting to control or coerce the younger set to adopt certain beliefs?

Luke 18:7-8

[Jesus said,] And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (For context, read 18:1-8.)

Jesus told his disciples a parable about a widow who repeatedly sought justice from a judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people" (vv. 2-3). Although he was not inclined to grant her request, he eventually relented just to get her off his back (vv. 4-5). Jesus told this parable to impress upon the disciples that they needed "to pray always and not to lose heart" (v. 1).

If even a corrupt government official can be persuaded to do the right thing, don't you think the God who created you and who loves you will respond favorably to your request for help? Jesus asked. But because justice on earth is often delayed and even denied (as was described in last week's lesson about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre), faith in an all-powerful, loving God can be hard to come by.

Questions: What experiences or situations (if any) make it harder for you to trust in God? How do you think Jesus was able to keep trusting God through all the abuse and injustice he suffered? What can we take away from his experience to strengthen us in our own faith journey?

2 Timothy 1:3, 5-7

I am grateful to God -- whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did -- when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ... I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. (For context, read 1:3-14.)

Paul bore witness to the way faith had been passed down through three generations in one family, from Lois, to her daughter Eunice, and then to her grandson Timothy.

Although Paul was not Timothy's natural father, he considered him his spiritual son, and when he could not be with him, he continued to support him through his constant prayers (v. 3).

Paul also reminded Timothy that it was his responsibility to stoke the flame of the Spirit within him, to keep his passion for Christ alive (vv. 6-7). Parents, grandparents, mentors, friends and church leaders all may play a part in nurturing faith in the next generation, but ultimately each person and each generation must pick up the baton of faith ("Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me," v. 13) that is passed to them and carry it for their own leg of the race.

So Paul could invite Timothy to join him in following after God, but it was Timothy's choice to accept Paul's invitation and the call of God (vv. 8-9) and to "[g]uard the good treasure entrusted to [him]" (v. 14).

But Timothy did not have to maintain his faith in his own strength, since "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (v. 7), and he could rely on "the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" and "the help of the Holy Spirit living in us" (vv. 13-14). Those same gifts are available to us and to the generations that follow us.

Questions: How have people in previous generations passed the faith on to you? How have you attempted to pass the faith on to people in generations that follow?

How do you access and benefit from the gifts of which Paul writes to Timothy, to strengthen your faith?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "Some of my pandemic reading last year was on the subject of Christian amulets. The church fathers are pretty much unanimous in condemning these, but the prevalence of amulets in the papyri (and the fact that the fathers had to speak against them) make it clear that Christian believers may have trusted in God, but when it came to having Psalm 91 or the Lord's Prayer or some pagan saying around their neck or wrist, most Christians may have treated these things like chicken soup: 'Couldn't hurt.'

"In Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 5205 I read about a person in the fourth or fifth century, probably a Christian, who bought a spell to curse the chariots of the Blue team," Ramirez continued. "Apparently this individual called upon the angels Gabriel, Raphael, Michael and Bouel, as well as the Egyptian god Horus, the spirits of the dead, the God of gods, and some other spirits, just to be on the safe side.

"Another writer discussing Egyptian Christianity made the point that we don't drop our old beliefs when we convert; we sort of integrate them together with our new beliefs. I don't necessarily see this amalgamation as a sign that Christianity is coming to an end. Since our Jewish cousins integrated into their monotheistic faith the story of the sons of God and the daughters of humans (Genesis 6:1-4), as well as all the other gods in the heavenly court in Psalm 82, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised if future Christians integrate their culture into the faith."

2. Entrepreneur and best-selling author Donald Miller wrote in his semi-autobiographical book, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*: "My most recent faith struggle is not one of intellect. I don't really do that anymore. Sooner or later you just figure out there are some guys who don't believe in God and they can prove he doesn't exist, and some other guys who do believe in God and they can prove he does exist, and the argument stopped being about God a long time ago and now it's about who is smarter, and honestly I don't care."

Consider this, also from Miller:

"I never liked jazz music because jazz music doesn't resolve. But I was outside the Bagdad Theater in Portland one night when I saw a man playing the saxophone. I stood there for 15 minutes, and he never opened his eyes. After that I liked jazz music.

"Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It is as if they are showing you the way.

"I used to not like God because God didn't resolve. But that was before any of this happened."

3. "I have a lot of faith," wrote Anne Lamott, in *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. "But I am also afraid a lot, and have no real certainty about anything. I remembered something Father Tom had told me -- that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."

"I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees," Lamott added.

How important is certainty in your faith? How comfortable are you with mystery and mess in your spiritual life?

4. In April, *Christianity Today* published a story of [How Seven Soldiers Carried One Bible into 11 Combat Tours](#). Jesse Maple, who saw the book as a kind of good luck charm, received the Bible from his mother before deploying to Vietnam in 1967. By 2019, the Bible had passed through the hands of seven fighting

men who took it with them into combat in five countries. The Bible provided strength, comfort and hope of divine protection to the men, whether or not they considered themselves religious.

Maple's brother Bill saw the Bible as "a security blanket for a baby ... extra armor." Another soldier who carried the Bible into battle, Zac Miller, a Christian, said, "In very trying times, having that Bible with you gave you a little ease that you were not alone and being watched over."

Eventually, the Bible became more to Maple than a rabbit's foot, talisman or amulet, when he looked beyond the cover of the Bible to find personal faith in God.

What do you think makes the difference between treating the Bible or Christian symbols such as the cross as part of superstitious philosophy, as opposed to a deep-seated theological underpinning for life?

5. Respond to this, from popular but sometimes controversial pastor and author, [Rob Bell](#): "I affirm the truth anywhere in any religious system, in any worldview. If it's true, it belongs to God."

6. Think about this: Jordan Sutton, author at [Clearpath.life](#), wrote: "It is counterintuitive, but letting people ask heretical questions might be the best way to prevent heresy. ... [There is an] increasing mass of people who have questions, are damned for their questions and then leave the confines of church community in search for authentic relationships -- and in the process, lose most, if not all, the grounding of their faith."

Sutton suggests: "When people ... teach things that go outside the boundaries of what is traditionally acceptable, ... it should be appropriate in the Christian faith that there is a healthy challenge of those ideas. But ... we should also be willing to question and challenge the ideas that have become acceptable. We are responsible in our lives for entering an ongoing journey with God and truth in which we are willing to work out our salvation [Philippians 2:12-13]."

Sutton asks: "What could church communities look like if they allowed questioning? What would discipleship look like with the awareness that where people are, isn't where they will always be? Could relaxing our control actually increase our effectiveness for keeping people on the journey?"

Responding to the News

On the matter of how to strengthen faith from one generation to the next, check out this book, [*The Value of Doubt: Why Unanswered Questions, Not Unquestioned Answers, Build Faith*](#), by TWW team member Bill Tammeus.

Prayer

O God, keep us from throwing out the baby of authentic faith with the bathwater of legalistic, heartless religious rituals and platitudes. In a world of earthquakes and mudslides, crumbling infrastructure and fraying social ties, and authorities who fail us, we struggle to find solid ground upon which to stand and build our lives. Remind us who you are, our Creator and the Solid Rock of our salvation. Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief! Amen.