ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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20 October 2012

Religious Convictions in 21st Century America

For the first time since the European settlement of North America in the early 1600s, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Protestants are in a minority. The Pew report shows that where 53% of respondents identified themselves as Protestant in 2007, in 2012 only 48% do so. This decline comes primarily from white evangelical and mainline Protestant Christians, but is especially pronounced among mainline churches. Entitled "'Nones' on the Rise," the report is an important indicator on the state of American religion in 2012. Here is a salient summary of the report:

- In the last five years, the unaffiliated (the "Nones") have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all US adults. Their ranks include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics, as well as 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation.
- A third of adults under 30 have no religious affiliation (32%), compared with just one-in-ten who are 65 or older (9%).
- The continued growth of the "Nones" is one of several indicators suggesting that the US public gradually may be growing less religious. However, America remains amazingly religious as a country. The number of Americans who currently say religion is important in their lives (58%) is little changed since 2007. The study has also found that the percentage of Americans who say that prayer is an important part of their daily life is 76% in 2012, the same as it was in 1987!!
- "Nones" can be found in all educational and incomes groups: men and women, university graduates and those without a university degree, people earning less than $30,000 annually and those earning $75,000 or more. But along ethnic lines, the largest jump was in the white population.
- The "Nones" are composed of people who rarely or never attend religious services (72%).
- In addition, the "Nones" are heavily Democratic in terms of political party affiliation and are liberal in their political ideology. More than 6-in-10 describe themselves as Democrats or say that they lean toward the Democratic Party. And roughly 38% describe themselves as liberal, while only 20% describe themselves as conservative. They tend to support abortion rights and gay marriage at a much higher rate than the US public at large. Further, the "Nones" constitute a growing share of Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters — increasing from 17% to 24% over the last five years. The Pew study argues that the "Nones" are becoming as important a constituency to Democrats as evangelicals are to Republicans.

How should we think about these rather stunning findings? What are some observations that can help us make sense of all this? Several thoughts:

- Lillian Daniel, author of *When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough*, argues that people who describe themselves this way are the "norm in a bland, self-centered American religious landscape." She goes on, "The very idea that you can pick and choose is, in some ways, a self-centered project, looking for the spiritual 'goods' without making a commitment."

- These most significant findings come at a time when there are no Protestants on the Supreme Court and the Republicans have their first presidential ticket with no Protestant nominees. This shift is potentially tectonic in terms of its implications for the next several decades.

- We must not ignore the shallowness and superficiality that characterizes almost all religious discussion in America today. In April of this year, I summarized the findings of sociologist Christian Smith on emerging adults in America (those 18 to 30 years of age). Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is the phrase he uses to summarize the worldview of this age group in America. From my perspective, that worldview fits perfectly with the Pew findings I just summarized above. What then are the elements of MTD? In his 2005 study, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Smith summarizes the worldview of America's emerging adults.

  This de facto creed is particularly evident among mainline Protestant and Catholic youth, but is also visible among black and conservative Protestants, Jewish teens and other religious types of teenagers. MTD has five key elements:

  1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
  2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
  3. The central goal in life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.
  4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
  5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Central to MTD is the moralistic approach to life—i.e., that living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful and responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful. MTD is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of Jesus Christ, of steadfastly praying one's prayers, of faithfully observing holy days, of building character through suffering, of depending on God's love and grace, or of committing to a life of gratitude and the pursuit of social justice. Instead, MTD is about feeling good, happy, secure and at peace. Smith writes: "It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people." Finally, MTD posits a God who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly involved in one's affairs—especially "affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved." The God of this faith is one who keeps a safe distance: He is often described as "watching over everything from above" and "the creator of everything and . . . just up there now controlling everything." For many teens, as with adults, God sometimes does get involved in people's lives, but usually only when they call on him, mostly when they have some trouble or problem or bad

feeling that they want resolved. Smith comments: "In this sense, the Deism here is revised from its classical eighteenth-century version by the therapeutic qualifier, making the distant God selectively available for taking care of needs." He goes on to argue that in MTD, God designed the universe and established moral law but He is not trinity, "did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel, was never resurrected from the dead, and does not transform through His Spirit. This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people feel good about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in their lives."

Smith makes clear that MTD is not an official religion or formal religious structure in America. Rather, MTD's "typical embrace and practice is de facto, functional, practical and tacit, not formal or acknowledged as a distinctive religion. . . it seems it is also a widespread, popular faith among very many US adults. Our religiously conventional adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously what the adult world is routinely modeling for and inculcating in its youth." MTD is a parasitic worldview that attaches itself to mainline and Catholic faith traditions, "feeding on their doctrines and sensibilities, and expanding by mutating their theological substance to resemble its own distinctive image." Teens and adults can enjoy the specific, unique aspects of their own traditions but also reap the benefits of a shared, harmonizing, interfaith religion. For these reasons, teens and adults who embrace MTD in its broad aspects do not argue or have much conflict about religion. Through the interviews and research of Smith, he discovered that what dominates the language of America's teens when it comes to their musings about life, including religious and spiritual life, "is primarily about personally feeling good and being happy." For all these reasons, Smith and his associates posit a significant model for understanding the distinct levels of operative American religion. Here is a summary of this argument:

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION
[Public symbols and discourse oriented toward national civil solidarity and politically sacred meanings]
ORGANIZATIONAL RELIGION
[Formal religious institutions and organizations, denominations, seminaries, divinity schools, camps, parachurch ministries, conference centers, etc.]
MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM
[A widely shared, largely apolitical, interreligious faith fostering subjective well-being and lubricating interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere]
INDIVIDUAL RELIGION
[Idiosyncratic, eclectic, often syncretistic, popular "lived" personal beliefs and practices of individuals]

MTD is having a decidedly important influence on all levels of American religions reflected in this model. A more inclusive, diverse and syncretistic religious dynamic is emerging in America. The important and central doctrines of historic, biblical Christianity are being supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness and an earned heavenly reward: "Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith."

See "'Nones' on the Rise" www.pewforum.org; Michelle Boorstein in the *Washington Post* (8 October 2012); Melissa Steffan in www.christianitytoday.com (11 October 2012); "US Protestants No Longer a Majority" in *The Guardian* (9 October 2012); Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, pp. 118-171.