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No Religious Preference

Recently I read an executive summary of a major demographic study of American religious choices. The authors in their analysis noted that perhaps the fastest growing religious segment of the American population are those who checked the box in front of "no religious preference" when given a chance to choose among the historic religious traditions.

Since reading that report I have found myself conflicted by that observation. On one level, it does not surprise me. There is a change taking place in the American religious consciousness, and this may very well be evidence that growing numbers of Americans are punting on the whole concept and experience of religion and joining the ranks of the committed secular.

On another level, however, I find myself insisting that this "finding" needs a great deal of nuancing in order to be properly understood. Too many well documented social trends run contrary to what a superficial reading of this finding indicate. Consider just a couple of those trends.

For one, the religions are not shrinking in America, but growing. The secularization thesis so popular at the middle of the twentieth century, was thoroughly discredited by the end of the century. Harvey Cox, wrote The Secular City, for example, and then publically thought better of it. Muslims and Buddhists have gained a growing following among Americans, and the number of Hindu temples built here increases annually. It may be that some of the traditional Christian denominations are struggling, but that decline has been more than offset by the stunning growth of independent mega-churches and some of the newer Christian sects such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. And there is no shortage of new religious movements appearing regularly on our cultural scene. In the face of these numbers, a thesis of overall religious decline seems difficult to substantiate.

For another, the traditionally cited challengers to religion in our day and age—science and atheism—provide little of substance to choose when up against the proven benefits of religious belief in terms of human flourishing, communal life, and, yes, eternal rewards. Two predictions: the so-called debate between science and religion will dissolve as each side finds growing value in the other. And the challenge of missionary atheism will reveal that what

Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and others are really offering us is a chance to join a secular religion called atheism—after all, a recent poll shows atheists know more about religion than any of us, and in the end simply want to replace our religion with theirs, using the oldest of proselytizing techniques known to humanity, that is, privileging their ultimate ideas while critiquing all the rest.

So what is happening when someone checks the box in front of no religious preference? Let me offer a suggestion that might be worth exploring further (since I have no large scale polling data to back me up). My suggestion is this: Perhaps the "no" in "no religious preference" should be seen as modifying not "religious" as much as "preference." That is, perhaps people who check that box are not saying they have "no religion" (which is how we tend to read it), but that they have "no preference." Perhaps what is at stake here is not religion *per se*, but our traditional understanding of preference, especially religious preference. Consider two observations that might support this reading.

First, people do seem to be uncomfortable with religious commitment. This has made them reluctant, for example, to endorse the commitment to Christian mission the way they might once have. When I tell many people that I am a professor of mission and world religion at Asbury Theological Seminary, they act interested in the world religion part and distinctly uncertain about the mission part. The way I understand this is to see it as a growing lack of commitment to the idea that one religion is so true and so important that it needs to be proclaimed as such.

Zygmunt Bauman, the British sociologist of religion, sees this lack of commitment to be part of a larger social trend he calls "liquid modernity." Whereas the task of identity formation was once held to be a task of building certainty and stability into our socially constructed identities, the new task, as expressed by growing numbers, seems to be a task of valuing breadth and flexibility in one's identity so as to be able to accommodate the lightening-fast speed of social change. Firm commitments, religious commitments, are sometimes seen as inhibiters to growth rather than facilitators. At the least, religious commitment is not valued as it once was.

Second, people are increasingly suspicious of religious institutions. Perhaps this is a continuation of a trend started in the '60s by young people rejecting the authoritative institutions of their parents, including religious institutions. The claim heard in those days of social upheaval that "I am spiritual but not religious," has grown from the mantra of a few to a chorus of the many. Membership in many social institutions, once seen as a privilege and something to be sought after, is now just as likely to be seen as a social burden that we would just as soon jettison if the social consequences are not too dear.

Is it possible that the key to mission work in the 21st century, especially in the Western developed countries, goes beyond telling the compelling story of what God did through Jesus Christ in order to set us free from sin? Of making religious preference a positive value, not a suspect one? It may just be the case that we now need to include an articulation of what it means to be committed to a religious viewpoint—and to let people know that it is all right to think that their religion is the best one.

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