

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

FAITH IN AMERICA: THE PEW STUDY

America has always been a pluralistic nation when it comes to religion. From the colonial days on, Americans have had a choice in how they worship God: The complexities and divisions of the Reformation came to America. But today, that choice from now a smorgasbord of options has changed the definition of pluralism. A recent survey released last week by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life confirms the complexity and reality of religious choice in America. Several thoughts:

- First a summary of the key findings.
 1. The survey confirmed that the US is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country; for the number of Americans who report that they are members of Protestant denominations now stands at barely 51%. Moreover, the Protestant population is characterized by significant internal diversity and fragmentation, encompassing hundreds of different denominations loosely grouped around three fairly distinct religious traditions: Evangelical Protestant churches (26.3% of the overall adult population), mainline Protestant churches (18.1%) and historically black Protestant churches (6.9%).
 2. The number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today is 16.1%, more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion. Of this 16.1%, those who describe themselves as atheist or agnostic comprise 1.6% and 2.4% of the adult population respectively, while the majority of the unaffiliated (12.1%) simply describe themselves as “nothing in particular.”
 3. More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion—or no religion at all. If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.
 4. Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic. Another way of looking at this is that roughly 10% of all Americans are former Catholics. These losses would have been even more pronounced were it not for

- the offsetting impact of immigration. Among foreign-born adults in the US, Catholics outnumber Protestants nearly two-to-one (46% Catholic vs. 24% Protestant); among native-born Americans, Protestants outnumber Catholics by an even larger number (55% Protestant vs. 21% Catholic). Immigrants are also disproportionately represented among several world religions (e.g., Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism).
5. In the category of “Christian” there is also Orthodoxy (0.6 %), Mormons (1.7%), Jehovah’s Witnesses (0.7%) and others (0.3%).
 6. Other key highlights of the report include:
 - Men are significantly more likely than women to claim no religious affiliation.
 - Among people who are married, nearly four-in-ten (37%) are married to a spouse who is of a different religious affiliation.
 - Mormons and Muslims have the largest families.
 - Of all the major ethnic groups, blacks are most likely to report a formal religious affiliation.
- Second, this important survey causes me to draw several conclusions.
 1. The political affiliation of evangelicals has changed, according to this survey. Whereas in 2001, 55% of white evangelicals 18 to 29 identified themselves as Republican, by 2007 that figure had dropped to 40%. This group is still deeply pro-life for example, but its moorings in the Republican party are not as strong. Michael Gerson comments that “These trends highlight a simple fact: Many evangelicals are center-right voters who respond to a message of social justice and community values, not only to a message of rugged individualism and unrestricted markets. Over the years, religious conservatives have made common cause with movement conservatives within the Republican Party—but they are not identical to movement conservatives.”
 2. This survey confirms something what we have been observing for some time now—denominational loyalty is eroding and Americans are far more fluid than ever in their religious choices.
 3. This survey also confirms the importance of religious affiliation and its connection to behavior in general. Michael Lindsay, assistant director of the Center of Race, Religion and Urban Life at Rice University echoes: “Religion is the single most important factor that drives American belief, attitudes and behaviors. It is a powerful indicator of where America will end up on politics, culture, and family life. If you want to understand America, you have to understand religion in America.”
 4. Stephen Prothero, chairman of the religion department at Boston University, makes a wise observation: The large number of Americans leaving organized religion and large numbers still embracing the fervor of evangelical Christianity point to the same desires. “The trend is towards more personal religion, and evangelicals offer that. . . Those losing out are offering impersonal religion and those winning are offering a smaller scale: mega-churches succeed not because they are mega but because they have smaller ministries inside.”

5. As Elesa Coffman of *Christianity Today* has observed: the definition of evangelical is a slippery one. “. . . [E]vangelicals care less about one’s church affiliation than about one’s beliefs (about Atonement, the inspiration of Scripture, and so forth) and behaviors (such as church attendance, daily devotions, and various measures of morality).” She continues that “we are talking about a tradition in which a substantial portion of the congregations are not affiliated with any denomination, or any other church, in any formal way. Evangelicals do not lend themselves well to generalizations.” So, even with a most helpful survey like this from the Pew organization, generalizations about evangelicals must be done with care.

See Coffman’s article in www.christianitytoday.com (26 February 2008); Neela Banerjee, *New York Times* (26 February 2008); Michael Gerson, *Washington Post* (27 February 2008); and Jacqueline L. Salmon and Michelle Boorstein, *Washington Post* (25 February 2008), which also provides a link to a “Summary of Key Findings.”

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

FRANK SCHAEFFER ON HIS PARENTS

The son of Francis and Edith Schaeffer, Frank (formerly know as Frankie), has just published a book about his parents entitled *Crazy for God*. It is a less than flattering portrait of his famous parents, the founders of L’Abri communities, first in Switzerland and then throughout the world. It is a disappointing and tragic book. Let me explain.

Frank has been an effective, though often abrasive and acerbic, writer. He has produced and directed films, most famously “How Should We Then Live?” and “Whatever Happened to the Human Race?” In a sense, he has been on a religious pilgrimage, most recently becoming a member of the Orthodox Church, renouncing the Reformed roots of his father, a Presbyterian. But his new book is a significant departure from his unpredictable life, because in it he offers a portrait of his parents that betrays a bitterness and anger. He exposes his parents’ flaws and seems to mock them unfairly. In the words of Os Guinness, “. . . the portrait he paints amounts to a death-dealing charge of hypocrisy and insincerity at the very heart of their life and work. In Frank’s own words, his parents were ‘crazy for God.’ Their call to the ministry ‘actually drove them crazy,’ so that ‘religion was actually the source of their tragedy.’ His dad was under ‘the crushing belief that God had called him to save the world.’ Because of this, his parents were ‘happiest when farthest away from their missionary work.’ Back at their calling, they were ‘professional proselytizers,’ their teaching was ‘indoctrination,’ and it was unclear whether people came to faith or were ‘brainwashed’ and ‘under the spell’ of his parents. Frank’s own arguments in their support, he now says, were a kind of ‘circus trick.’” At the heart of Frank’s new book is this conviction: Francis Schaeffer lacked intellectual integrity. “There was a lie at the very heart of the work of L’Abri, and the thousands of people who over the decades came to L’Abri and came to faith or deepened in faith, were obviously conned too.”

Francis and Edith Schaeffer were, as are all people, flawed and sinful, but it is hurtful and wrong to charge them with hypocrisy. Several comments, most of them following the essay by Os Guinness:

1. Frank's portrayal of his mother is "cruel and deeply dishonoring, monstrously ungrateful since she poured herself out for him far more than his workaholic father." In her nineties now, with a failing memory, Edith was the key to the ministry of L'Abri: She was a woman of immense love, indomitable faith, tireless prayer, boundless energy, a lover of life and beauty, remarkable hospitality and joy, and someone always available to counsel people. Incredibly, Frank describes her as a "high-powered nut" and the "best at the martyrdom game."
2. He is scathing and totally wrong in his portrayals of Billy Graham and Carl Henry. His remarks seem self-serving, yet sadly inaccurate.
3. As Guinness convincingly demonstrates, Frank is wrong and grossly inaccurate in his portrayal of how his father fits into the history of 20th century evangelicalism. He makes so many mistakes and mischaracterizations about events of this period that these alone make the book questionable and of little value.
4. Guinness makes the case that the real problem with Frank Schaeffer is that he was spoiled. "He was more like a poster child for Benjamin Spock than the son of 'fundamentalist missionaries.' Having been born well after his sisters and having survived polio as a child, he was rarely challenged, disciplined or denied. As a result, he grew up a 'little Napoleon,' as some of the L'Abri students called him. He would boast that he could twist his parents around his little finger, and time and again he proved it."

In short, Frank Schaeffer's portrayal of his parents is a distortion and more like a personal vendetta than accurate history. As Guinness argues, "Francis and Edith Schaeffer's place in 20th-century evangelicalism—and their contribution to the lives of so many—is too important to surrender to such a scurrilous caricature." Guinness says of Francis: "I have never met anyone anywhere like Francis Schaeffer, who took God so passionately seriously, people so passionately seriously, and truth so passionately seriously." Perhaps, that should be the final word on the legacy of Francis Schaeffer.

See Os Guinness, "Fathers and Sons" in *Books and Culture: A Christian Review*, www.christianitytoday.com.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY: R.I.P.

Last week, at the age of 82, William F. Buckley died at his Connecticut home. Principally through two vehicles—the *National Review* and his PBS TV program, "Firing Line"—Buckley provided the energy and leadership for the renewal of modern-day conservatism. Several thoughts about Buckley:

1. In one of his first books, *God and Man at Yale*, Buckley properly characterized his alma mater as a bastion of atheistic collectivism. He skewered the university as fostering a secular worldview that was more open to Karl Marx than Jesus Christ. Rightly, he saw long before many others that higher education was graduating people more critical of American values and traditions than anyone realized.
2. Buckley championed individual initiative and energy as the vital center of a renewed civilization, not socialist collectivism. He mocked the left as fostering an unhealthy dependence on government that always, hopelessly, failed people, for it cannot deliver what it promises.
3. A fervent anti-communist during the Cold War, he championed a well-balanced ideological revival of conservatism. More than anyone perhaps, he helped promote Ronald Reagan as president. Yet, Buckley was not afraid to disagree with Reagan, as he did over the Panama Canal issue.
4. Finally, as a devout Roman Catholic, Buckley stood for a deep-seated set of ethics rooted in Christianity and the teachings of Jesus.

For many reasons I will miss Bill Buckley, for his energy, vision and understanding of the human condition have been matched by few others.

See George Will's testimony to him in the *Washington Post* (29 February 2008) and William McGurn's in the *Wall Street Journal* (29 February 2008).