

Religious Shift

John H. Bryant

Across the country and world, thoughtful and surprised readers were confronted at the start of 2008, with an announcement via Google, Yahoo and various world press outlets the existence of an American shift in religion. I knew it was true for me, but how could I have known others were involved?

Religious interest never goes away but in the last decade interest has risen to new levels. Two studies in particular to be highlighted here mark today's on-going monologue about religion in America. The first study is not about a shift at all but acts as a reference point for this article. The research is based on structured telephone surveys of more than 2,000 households and in-depth interviews with more than 140 people in 2006 conducted through the University of Minnesota by sociologist Penny Edgell. Researchers found that Americans rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, homosexuals and other groups as "not sharing their vision of American society." Furthermore, Americans are least willing to let their children marry atheists.

The Edgell survey was followed by the release in February, 2008, of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. That survey of over 35,000 Americans found that nearly half questioned were not practicing the religion of their parents. While that finding was no big deal for some, it was a bomb for many, especially those involved with the business of religion.

The Pew Forum study confirmed what has been speculated for years about believers:

- the long-held belief that denominational loyalty is fraying —
- those greatest impacted are mainline Protestant and evangelical churches —
- One in six overall (16.1%) reported they were not connected with any particular religious faith —
- This number rose to 1 in 4 between the ages of 18 -29 who said they were not affiliated with any religion —
- Twelve percent were split 50/50 between a) those that were secular and unaffiliated, and b) those who said they were religious and unaffiliated —
- Catholics have seen numbers diminish for almost 40 years and seem to be outside the survey radar —
 - Absolute numbers don't reflect major declines in the last four years
 - Their age demographic has shifted more rapidly than other Protestant denominations
 - Catholics have the broadest mixture of education levels but declining numbers in the 18 – 29 age group
 - Supported by older populations including high percentage of immigrants who bring that religion with them

What's going on?

Is all of this change part of an evolving culture (a reshuffle of the believers) or is it some type access road to Armageddon or similar worst case scenario? Rather than constructing a "the sky is falling" rant or a faith-based monologue to spin the Edgell and Pew Forum information, it occurred to me to ask the following two questions:

1. **"What would a shift in a spiritual dependence look like if one were to occur?"**
2. **"If there is a shift from something, will there be a shift TO something, if anything?"**

Consistent with my position on the falseness of anything pretending to result from a single cause, (monocausality; mono- causal- itis), I present a list the factors involved in what changes from denominational loyalty to 'disloyalty' or 'other' looks like. Some are about the organizations themselves and others are about the behavior of organisms or both. Consider that 'loyalty' is a function of branding and conditioned behavior just like any other preference. In response to Question #1 above, here is a list of 'what's going on' when a spiritual shift occurs:

- less contact with the ancestral family as exemplary of appropriate social activities
- Untethered population less anchored to a city or job
- Lack of an "either / or" logic as atheist or agnostic when they were 'believers'
- personalization of faith..."little bit Buddha, little bit Pilgrim..."
- information access benefitting a type of 'cafeteria religion'

- reduced needs for the traditions that fostered initial religions
- vulnerability to product life-span aging due to use marketing methods brought to consumer religion
- lack of definitive script for believers on what they believe or what others believe
- mega growth of nondenominational mega-churches who get their members from denominations that depend on brand loyalty [family – community – tradition]
- nondenominational congregations requiring less of members
 - less conservative / evangelical
 - more inclusive
 - many preach needs fulfillment to parishioners
- nondenominational Protestants growing in number
- nondenominational Protestants are younger
- nondenominational church members not identifying with born-again or evangelical movements
- Protestant evangelical denominations with declining memberships
 - Have average higher [mean] membership age
 - record lower birth rates – the ‘numbers’ game
 - attract fewer immigrants
 - involved in fewer divisive battles over sexuality and the Bible

So, what can we glean from the above? Clearly, the break-up of denominational ‘loyalty’ corresponds to the break-up of ‘brand loyalty’ as seen in marketing and economics. Behaviorally, brand loyalty dissipates and corresponds with a lack of stimulus control, loss of utility [both comparative and internal], which may best be described as a loss of features and benefits of the belief system it was based on.

Such a state of affairs as listed above has implications for evangelicals, fundamentalists, cyber ministries and the conservative radio and TV personalities that spew various contentious opinions about judge’s legal rulings, education and science, personal behavior, sexual behavior and a bevy of other subjects open to those with a bull horn. That means it has implications for us all. Fundamentalist’s ministries stand to gain much from the unraveling of major congregations as splinter ministries design their appeal to those that have been “lost in transition”.

When weighted by the results of Edgell’s group, the results tell us more. Edgell’s research reported that almost 40% of those interviewed said that atheists did not share their vision of society. Edgell called that one result alone “a glaring exception to the rule of increasing tolerance over the last 30 years.” I am sure she is on to something, but her study must not have questioned the tolerance for opposing views in politics, business, child care, health care, science, literature, energy options, global warming, the homeless, violence, gays, Arabs, immigration, war, education, social intimidation or white collar crime. She did not provide any increased tolerance references.

Again, looking at this data behaviorally, we may see what things are being shown to be of value and what things are related to discomfort. For years the behavior of many denominations’ members were controlled by a bevy of reinforcers, punishers and isolation, some subtle and some not so subtle. [I was the first non-Catholic boy allowed to date my first wife.] We like to think it is not so, but some American communities are very much like Shiite and Sunni communities in the Middle East. It is culturally so here and there and it is strongly conditioned and it has been that way since the days of the cave.

However, with increased access to options, like in any free market, there is a loss in some of the control over members. Once other options were available due to travel, college, the Internet [think ‘social communities online taking some of the social reinforcement away from the local church communities’], globalization, immigration, etc., the contingencies controlling the membership were no longer under the same dynamic stimulus control and history. When the ‘old’ ways were questioned without satisfactory answers and people found other sources of social or spiritual reinforcement, our parents’ denomination became less valuable. Without emerging or imminent value of an institution, the shift is one consequence.

For those in the business of selling a value proposition and filling the pews each Saturday or Sunday or whenever, woven into the gloomy numbers is a formula for how to fail; don’t change but make bigger demands on the membership! Now, the nondenominational churches reach more people because they offer some things that the past churches did not. With unrest, younger people and more diverse people, particularly the ‘mega churches’ which broadcast 24/7 in many communities via cable ministries, are being given a test nod.

For churches that select doing more of what they have always done, such as an intensified focus on asking their creator for survival guidance, the data show that the membership values something else. Still others have returned to more traditional foundations to try and retrace what they once had. Like the fundamentalist measures of the present Pontiff, these measures are not being met with open arms or full pews. While speculation, one might expect continued disharmony within the churches, mosques, synagogues, and gathering places as the members of the old ways withdraw further from ecumenical approaches while, at the same time, others embrace those ecumenical efforts that allow their religion options, evolution and survival potential.

So, where are we?

That there is a shift in religion preferences is clear. However, the answers about a shift are not in the questionnaires or the surveys. Whether there is a shift from one organized religion to another organized or unorganized religion is less clear. Perhaps 'nondenominational' is a metaphor for social network of different cultures, languages, neighborhoods. We'll see.

In the US, it is presumed that people are religious [whatever that has come to mean]. Clearly, measuring religiousness or "religiouscity" is a tricky business here and in most areas of the world. Because of our history, we have some sensitivity to religious right to privacy. Thus, whenever surveys, questionnaires, or even covert self-reports are used to assess sexual, religious or political information the results must be looked upon with great skepticism. America is an environment where not having a professed organized belief system is akin to having a scarlet letter. Not many are going to wear it where it can be seen.

People that hold stated beliefs and are willing to tell the truth will still give different answers based on the interpreted agenda of the one doing the questioning. Clearly, 'truth' is contextual. We are not going to tell all. It won't work anywhere the answers come with the potential for negative consequences. Without knowing what the potential consequences are, the answers are going to be skewed toward the 'none of your business' and substitutes for the *status quo*. Who wants to show indignation about web sites that list registered sex offender details represents double jeopardy? How about a convention for those with erectile dysfunction? Come on! Prior to Viagra boosts, no man in the civilized world had erectile dysfunction.

But, the atheists and agnostics are a different group as the Edgell study showed. They have no representation. There are not consequences to worry about or any preserved 'political correctness' to attend to for attacking them for not belonging to a group that believes. That is the irony about tolerance Edgell doesn't address but is addressed here to reiterate the power of consequences over how we behave.

As a partial conclusion from the data, the shifting denomination memberships are going from somewhere and not all are going to church. Some are not going anywhere but many are going away. Away from organized religions of all types and temples. Away from intolerance that the population shows proudly and away from belief systems that are set up to define people bad, defective, dangerous, evil, heathen and wrong because they don't think like you do.

What is also true is that most Americans don't know what they believe any more than why they behave. No, they're not the mad-dog versions of Madalyn Murray O'Hair or Sam Harris on HGH. Most are too busy to notice they don't know. Others don't put value on things or ideas that don't put gas in their tank or companions in their bed. Others, in the 'doubtful' group, are those that checked and concluded there are no compelling reasons for believing in any of the gods. All these groups combined arguably find those who are absolutely sure of their God and the literal truths of sets of holy books to be boorish and ill-informed. As one ex-member of a large church in the mid-west said, "Organized religion is the path for the most gullible."

Yes, there are more atheists and agnostics than we'd like to think living in our 'Christian' nation. They may be 'in the closet', so to speak, or they may just not get any value from others who think like they do. The two surveys mentioned make that possibility very probable. Nonbelievers aren't a group collective. They have no superstitions or stories to keep relevant. Maybe the fact that atheists and agnostics are growing and evolving contributes to why there is a shift from religious orthodoxy. The orthodoxy that gives the world guilt, hatred, damnation, pedophiles, sanctioned terrorism and other 9/11 type events doesn't jive with devotion, altruism and peace. Maybe that is why the Pontiff encyclicals are harsher, the mullahs are more incessant and the faithfully righteous are filled with brimstone like the good ol' days. But a loud or popular voice doesn't make the message true. Maybe in the next 40 years we'll quietly see a shift in America's vision of the value of religion.