



## **Is The Baylor Religion Study Reliable?** *An Analysis from the Council for Secular Humanism*

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## IS THE BAYLOR RELIGION STUDY RELIABLE?

**Gregory S. Paul**

A growing body of research by sociologists and major survey organizations shows that the population of the United States is becoming significantly less religious. Other first-world nations have secularized even more extensively. Yet this year Baylor University, a conservative Christian institution, released another installment in its series of widely cited studies contending exactly the opposite. Baylor researchers declare that America is as religious as it has always been, and that belief in religion is a universal characteristic displayed by all peoples around the world. These findings contradict those of many other social science practitioners – and in a direction favorable to Baylor’s interests as a Baptist institution. A close look at the way relevant statistics have been handled by Baylor and its premier researcher, Rodney Stark, suggests that key data is being presented in a way that misrepresents significant social trends and may serve to mislead the public.

### **Surveys and a Book**

Starting in 2006, the Baptist-connected Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (BISR) has released results from what it describes as a continuing series of surveys. These surveys are executed every two years in coordination with another, less overtly religious organization, the Gallup Organization. (Gallup performs the actual polling.) According to the BISR website, this long-term project “plumbs all facets of American religion and spirituality in depth.” Some of the 2008 results have been posted at the Baylor website; the bulk of the research and analysis is presented in a book titled *What America Really Believes*. Published this year by the university’s press, *What America Really Believes* was largely authored by the well-known and controversial sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark. Stark is Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor. There are numerous additional contributors, all but one also from Baylor. Because of this, and because Baylor is promoting the report, I will refer to it as “the Baylor study.”

Baylor’s results are often cited by the media, which apparently assume that BISR is a reasonably objective research institute presenting balanced statistical analysis to the public. The following examination of their work reveals that this is not always true.

## **Assessing Nontheism and Theism**

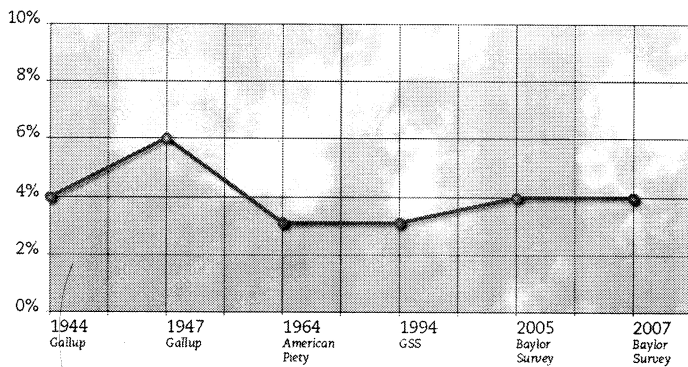
How it is possible for Baylor to document levels of religious commitment so different from those found by other researchers? In part, it is because the Baylor team has adopted a curious way of treating atheism, forms of unbelief short of atheism, and religious belief. This approach places a disproportionate emphasis on *convinced atheism* – the confident rejection that a personal God exists – at the expense of more moderate forms of nontheism. Many Americans reject conventional religious beliefs but cannot be described as atheists. Among them are agnostics and “spiritual but not religious” respondents who may believe in a vaguely-defined higher power but not in God as traditionally conceived. Even people who describe them selves as fence-sitting agnostics can be strongly anti-religious, Bill Maher being a prominent example. If a nation’s populace included only a few percent strict atheists but three quarters were agnostic or “spiritual but not religious” that would be a disaster for that nation’s churches. Baylor’s methods largely ignore these doubters, making nonbelief appear less prevalent in society than it truly is. The Baylor team treats almost any deviation from strict atheism as a sign of religiosity. Doing so falsely maximizes the apparent level of faith. This issue has been extensively discussed in the sociological literature; Baylor’s view of nontheism as restricted almost entirely to firm atheism stands revealed as simplistic and obsolete.

## **American Nonbelievers: Tiny Minority or Fast-Growing Force?**

Surveys by a broad range of research institutions show that atheism and nontheism (including agnosticism and higher-power beliefs) are growing consistently among Americans. Yet the BISR website states that during “the past 63 years, several polls show that the percentage of atheists has not changed at all, holding steady at only 4 percent of Americans who say they do not believe in God.” In *What America Really Believes*, this is the theme of a chapter titled “Atheism: The Godless Revolution That Never Happened.” A close examination of how the Baylor team makes this case is revealing.

Baylor offers the following chart to demonstrate what it alleges as the consistently low incidence of American nontheism:

Table 52  
Percent of those who do not believe in God by year



Yet something is peculiar about this chart. What happened to the 1950s?

Baylor cites the first two Gallup polls to ask about respondents' belief in God, from 1944 and 1947. The next data point cited is from 1964. The gap in time is obscured because data points are plotted equidistantly across the horizontal axis, rather than accurately spacing them in accord with elapsed time. This is a grave error. Consider that the period from 1944 to 1947 at the left-hand end of the chart – and the period from 2005 to 2007 at the right-hand end of the chart – appear equivalent to the *30-year gap* between 1964 and 1994 at the center! If the data points were more accurately spaced, it would be immediately apparent how irregularly separated they are. More important, it would be obvious how carefully the chosen data points have been selected. For example, there is no data from the 1950s. Are we to believe that George Gallup, founder of the Gallup organization and a strongly committed Christian, failed to poll Americans about their belief in God during the height of the Cold War years? To the contrary, Gallup posed this question twice during the 1950s. Here is the exact Gallup data from the forties and fifties, including the data omitted from Baylor's Table 52:

Question: Do you believe in God, or a universal spirit?

	1944	1947	1953	1954	Average
Yes	96.36	94.21	98.31	97.81	96.7
No	1.27	3.43	1.37	1.23	1.83

Gallup actually found that on average, fewer than 2 percent of Americans were willing to tell a pollster that they did not believe in a god or some sort of cosmic essence. The 1947 result of 3.43 percent is a statistical oddity or “outlier” which many workers would remove. If it is removed, fewer than 1.5 percent identified themselves as denying the supernatural during the 1940s and 1950s. (If the 1947 result is retained, then Baylor’s claim that atheism holds steady must account for its rapid rise just after World War II and its equally rapid decline thereafter.) But the Baylor researchers did not utilize the percentage of respondents that answered the God question “no.” Instead they took the *percentage that answered “yes,”* then subtracted that from 100 percent. That is how they arrived at their figure of 4 to 6 percent nonbelievers, a number that appears to hold relatively steady across the years. But this is an illegitimate procedure if one is claiming to count Americans who don’t believe in God. In 1944 only 1.27 percent of respondents said no, they did not believe in God. The number who *did not say yes* was larger: about 3.64 percent. That is because the group that did not say yes included those who said no ... and *also those who refused to answer*, some of whom were almost certainly theists. By utilizing the larger figure, Baylor’s Table 52 creates the illusion that the number of atheists holds stable over time by exaggerating the number of atheists in the 1940s.

That statistical maneuver is bad enough, but that Baylor ignored the Gallup data from the 1950s is incredible. Since its current project is conducted in cooperation with the Gallup Organization, it hardly seems likely that Baylor researchers did not know this data existed; for example, it is available at Gallup Brain, the Gallup Organization’s online public opinion database. Rather, Baylor workers must have found the 1950 statistics inconvenient to include. Imagine processing the 1950 figures in the same way as the numbers from the 1940s. If you subtract either the 1953 or 1954 “yes” scores – 98.31 or 97.81 – from 100, you wind up with a number close to just 2 percent. Even though this number conflates actual atheists with respondents who refused to answer, it is far too low to support the Baylor thesis that the number of atheists holds steady over time. And so the inconvenient 1950s data simply disappears.

Yet that is just the beginning. Here are more Gallup answers to the “belief in God” question that Baylor ignored.

	1965	1967	1978	1988	1994
Yes	96.22	98.46	94.21	94.21	95.65
No	1.69	1.28	3.92	4.61	3.34

Results from the 1960s resemble those from preceding decades. In the 1970s and 1980s we see a definite upturn in the number who deny God’s existence – and a corresponding decline in the number of believers.

Now we must allow for an additional complication. Gallup’s established query “Do you believe in God, or a universal spirit?” does not meet modern standards and is no longer used. Good riddance – it was actually two questions in one, the addition of the universal spirit obscuring the results. It is also too simplistic, demanding a simple yes or no answer to a question with two parts. In recent years Gallup introduced multiple God questions, improving the quality of the data but reducing its comparability to earlier polls.

The compilers of Baylor’s Table 52 did not find it necessary to include these figures, either:

	1999	2004	2007	2007	2008
Believe in God	85.85	80.87	86.29	78.39	77.87
Don’t believe in God, but believe in a higher power	8.25	12.61	7.56	13.84	15.42
Don’t believe in either	4.81	5.14	5.84	6.59	5.70
Don’t know	--	0.56	0	0.37	0.62
Adding last two together for total atheists and agnostics	4.81	5.70	5.84	6.96	6.32

Far from holding steady over the years, the number of atheists (and agnostics) is sharply higher than in decades past. It has risen even more significantly since the early 1990s.

We can see something else of interest from this more recent series: The new God questions make it possible to separate those who believe only in an impersonal higher power from believers in a traditional God. This reveals that only about eight in ten – not the 90+ percent often stated – currently believe in one or more of the traditional deities. (Of course, left undefined is what a “higher power” is. In principle a committed atheist might respond that he or she believes in a higher power, meaning by that something like the collective consciousness of humanity or the nature of the universe.) In any case, we can now see that the population believing only in an amorphous, impersonal higher power is expanding at the expense of believers in the traditional God.

But wait, there’s yet more Gallup data that could have been included in Table 52 (both of the surveys below are from the same year):

	2005a	2005b
You are convinced God exists	79.41	77.76
You think God exists, but you have a little doubt	8.31	2.89
You think that God exists, but you have a lot of doubt	2.89	3.74
You think God probably does not exist, but you are not sure	3.91	3.94
You are convinced God does not exist	3.35	1.54
Adding the last two together for total atheists and agnostics	7.26	5.48

And that’s not all.

	2001	2004	2007
Believe in God	89.70	89.91	86.29
Not sure about God	6.83	5	7.56
Don't believe in God	2.69	4.25	5.84
Don't know	--	0.7	0
Adding the last three together for total atheists and agnostics	9.52	9.95	13.4

Just last year, *more than 13 percent of Americans* told Gallup they had significant doubts about the existence of God. This is the highest level of religious skepticism recorded by the organization over six decades. Nor does any recent Gallup survey match the extremely low levels of disbelief in God reported from the 1940s into the 60s. Gallup's data shows clearly that popular atheism has *not* held stable over time. On the contrary, unbelief in God was far less prevalent in the mid-twentieth century than it is today. This forces the question: How could the Baylor team be unaware of a large body of findings made by the organization that is its partner in the current survey project?

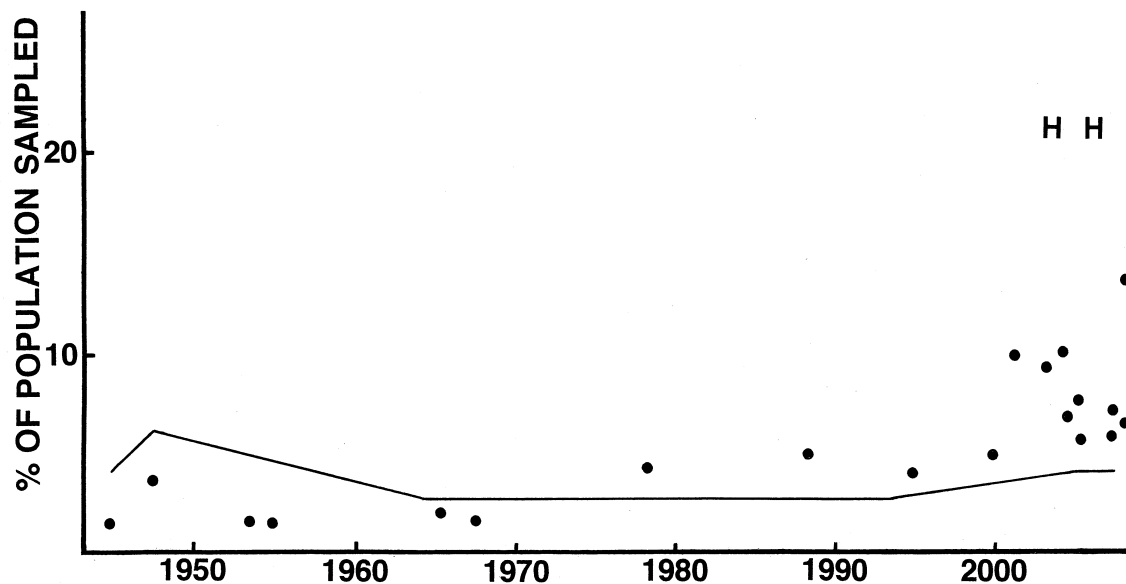
Surveys by sources other than Gallup have yielded similar results. A 2004 Pew survey found that self-described atheists and agnostics made up 3.2 percent of its respondents, though when secularists were added nonbelievers tipped the scales at nearly 11 percent. A BBC/ICM poll found that 10 percent of Americans do not believe in God, although half of those opt for belief in a higher power. Eight percent of respondents to the big turn-of-the-century International Social Survey Program Religion II study said that they did not think there existed a God or higher power, or that they had doubts – the basic attributes of outright atheists and agnostics like myself. If believers in a higher power are excluded, the number disbelieving in a traditional creator deity rises to 15 percent. In a 2006 CBS News survey, 8 percent likewise said they believed neither in a higher power nor a god. More than a decade's worth of polling by the Barna Group, a conservative evangelical Christian organization, finds that atheists and agnostics constitute between 7 and 13 percent of their respondents, with the average at 10 percent.



We now come to what are, so far, the two most important religion polls of the twenty-first century. In 2003 and 2006, Harris Interactive conducted two notably innovative surveys. To understand what makes them unique some background it is necessary. It is well documented that atheists are widely disparaged. Only a minority of Americans tell pollsters they would vote for an atheist or marry one. There is substantial evidence that some nonreligious people may be reluctant to admit their unbelief on surveys. Conversely, believing respondents tend to exaggerate their level of religiosity; for instance, Americans inflate their level of church attendance by a factor of as much as two. This bias is well known, but most surveys do little to correct for it. (The Baylor team appears to ignore it.) Harris Interactive chose to pursue more reliable numbers, and carefully crafted its 2003 and 2006 polls to discover more accurately what Americans think about God. Although these surveys were not structured identically, they produced nearly identical results – a notable convergence that reinforces their basic accuracy and reduces the possibility that either is a statistical outlier. In the two surveys 4 percent either said that they are absolutely certain there is no God, or claimed to be atheists who deny God’s existence. In one survey 5 percent were somewhat certain there is no God, and another 12 percent were not sure; these fit the popular meaning of agnostics. So when the 4 percent firm God-deniers are added in, that is a total of 21 percent who disbelieve or doubt that God exists. In the second survey, 14 percent claimed to be agnostics who were skeptical about God but were not atheists, and another 3 percent responded “not sure,” qualifying as agnostics. When the 4 percent outright atheists were figured in, this again came to 21 percent who did not believe in a supreme being. Because these two Harris Polls take the greatest pains to minimize nontheists’ reluctance to admit their lack of faith, they are probably the most accurate available.

These seminal Harris surveys are nowhere cited by the Baylor study.

Let’s chart the line from Baylor’s Table 52, which as we’ve seen was based on only six polls between World War II and the present – including their questioned interpretation of the 1940s Gallup figures. And let’s compare them to a broader data set. The figure below incorporates *all* of the actual Gallup results published during the period (dots). It also includes the Harris results (H), which the reader will recall were based on polling questions recast in order to heighten accuracy in eliciting respondents’ opinions about God.



By ignoring all but a small fraction of the large set of available surveys, Baylor effectively selected the few datasets that served the story they are trying to sell: namely, that skepticism regarding the existence of supernatural deities occurs among Americans at persistently low levels. Quite the contrary, the actual results indicate a strong growth in disbelief, particularly since the 1990s. This is in tune with the agreement of all major survey organizations that the nonreligious – those who report their religious preference as “none” – have *doubled* in number since the early 1990s. The big debate has been whether this “rise of the nones” reflects a genuine rise in nontheism or – as the Baylor researchers argue – a growing disaffection of believers from organized religion while the number of nontheists somehow remains constant. At no time is there proposed a credible mechanism why otherwise believing people might be growing dissatisfied with their churches while the number of disbelievers remained static.

In any case, this debate is now over: the number of Americans who disbelieve in God is definitely growing, and the growth of unbelief is revealed to be the primary factor in the rise of the nones.

What story do the data really tell? First, if we assume that Gallup statistics from the 1950s are reasonably accurate, there may then have been about two million nonbelievers in a population of 150 million. If this is true, then the number of American unbelievers in the 1950s was roughly equivalent to the number of American Mormons at that time. Since those days, Mormons are proud that their numbers have tripled (to six million) while the national population has merely doubled (to 300 million.) The relevance of this observation will quickly be apparent.

If the 2003 and 2006 Harris Polls are anywhere near correct, atheists and agnostics now number some 60 million, a *thirty-fold* increase since the 1950s! Even if the disparity is significantly smaller than Harris figures suggest, the growth of disbelief has far outpaced that of the Latter-day Saints, by most accounts the nation's fastest-growing denomination. And while the Saints have grown mainly by rapid reproduction, disbelief has ballooned primarily via conversion, as adult individuals lost confidence in the creeds in which they were raised. It is plausible that unbelief has grown so very rapidly in the United States? Yes, because as we will see below, unbelief has grown even more rapidly in other first-world nations. In today's America, the number who are skeptical of God and the supernatural is probably quite close the number of Roman Catholics – or conservative evangelicals. Doubtless the number of unbelievers dwarfs the numbers of Jews, Mormons, and Muslims combined (each makes up 2 percent or less of the population). (All the totals in this paragraph concern total populations – that is, men, women, and children. To estimate totals for adults reduce figures by one-fifth.)

This year, Pew released a megasurvey that asked one of the most pertinent questions in the history of religious polling: Is the respondent certain a personal God exists? *Only half of respondents answered "yes."* This revealing yet little-noticed result means that fully half of Americans harbor doubt regarding the existence of a God who cares about humanity. If true, this is compelling evidence that America is not the nation of deep devotion commonly supposed.

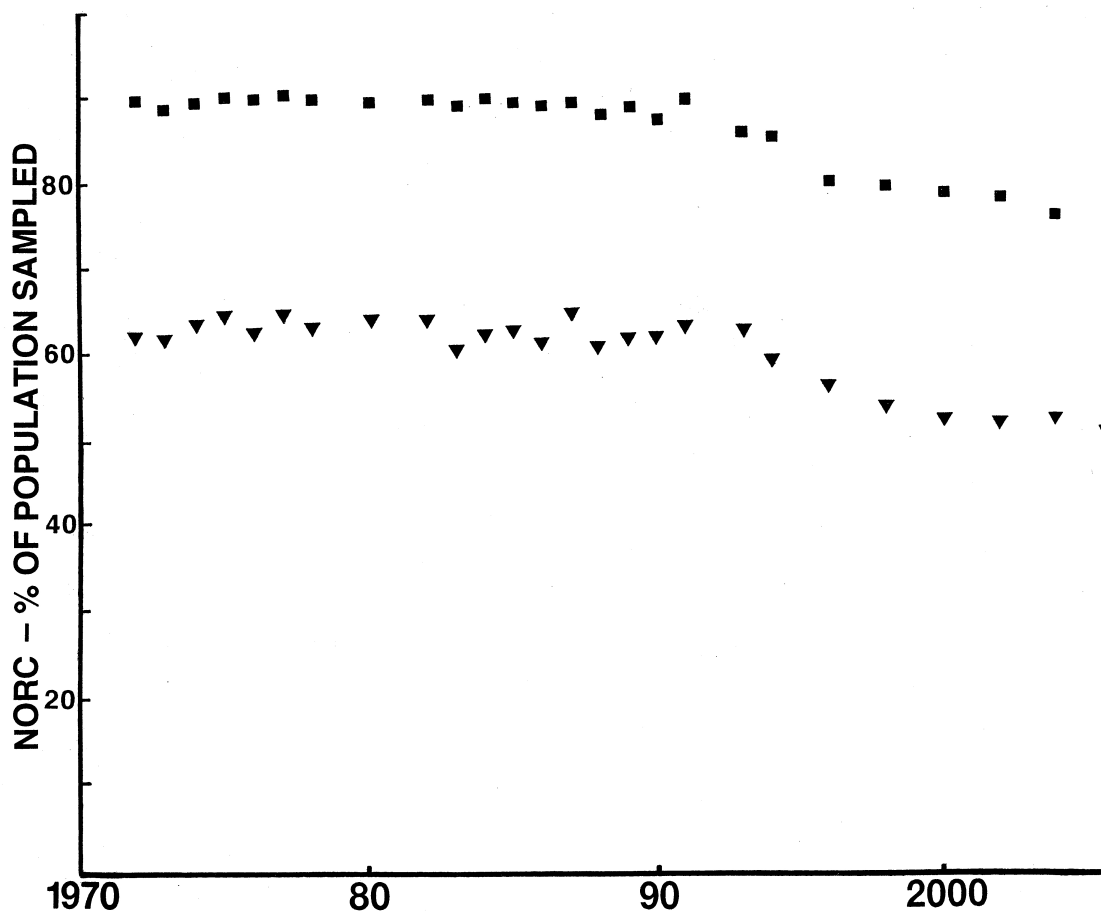
In the 1960s, Gallup found that more than eighty percent of Americans were convinced that some kind of God exists (not quite the same as the narrower question of absolute belief in a personal God). Current surveys find that support even for this opinion has sunk into the seventies or sixties.

An international study by Pew which combined several measures of national religiosity – and ranked the U.S. at only 1.5 on a scale of 3.

None of this telling evidence for the reality of secularization is found in the Baylor study.

### The Faithful: Losing the Very Ground Unbelievers Seize

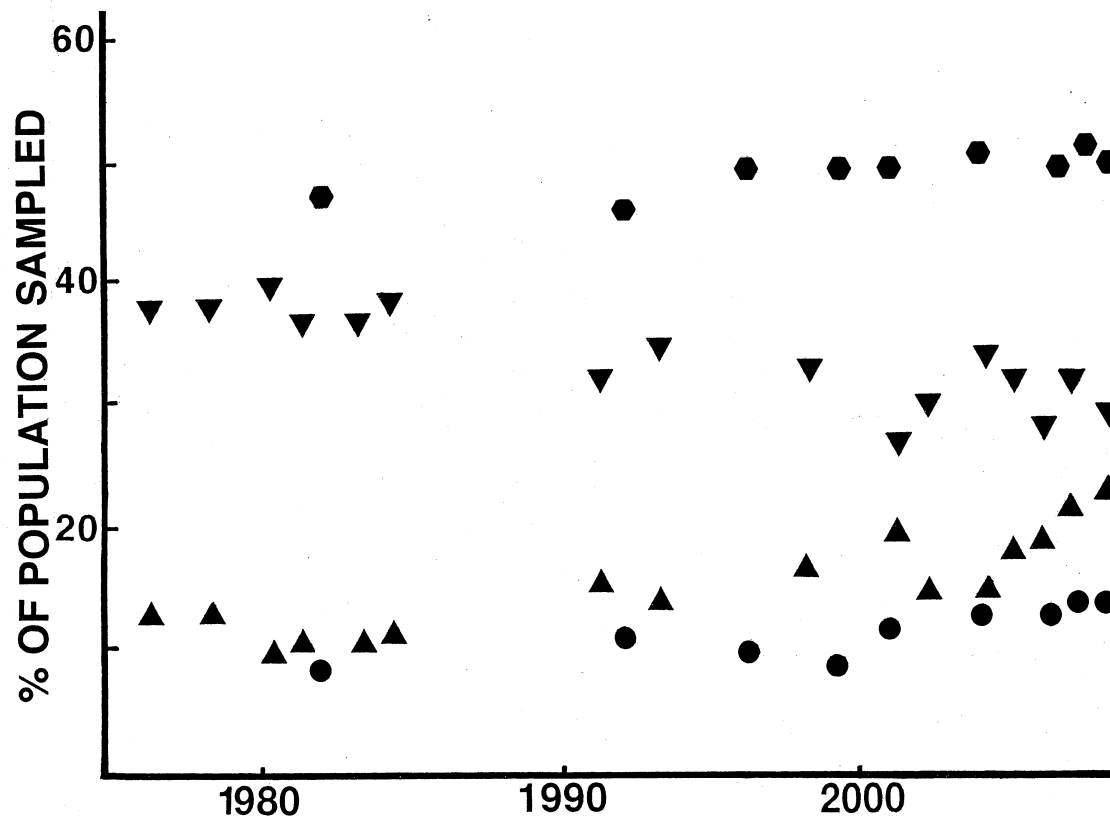
Meanwhile, what can we say of Christianity in America? A century ago, it was nearly universal, which is to say that almost all Americans self-identified as Christians. Today Christians make up just 75 percent of the population. This figure experienced its most rapid decline starting in the early 1990s, when the nonbelieving population entered its fastest period of growth. The number of Christians would be even smaller if not for immigration. Roman Catholics in particular are holding steady only because of immigration by Hispanics. Demographers often number Mormons among the Protestants; if this relatively fast-growing denomination is counted separately – as its many unique points of doctrine justify – then Protestants have probably *already* become a minority on this continent, for the first time since the founding of Jamestown.



Squares are Christians, triangles are Protestants. Data from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC).

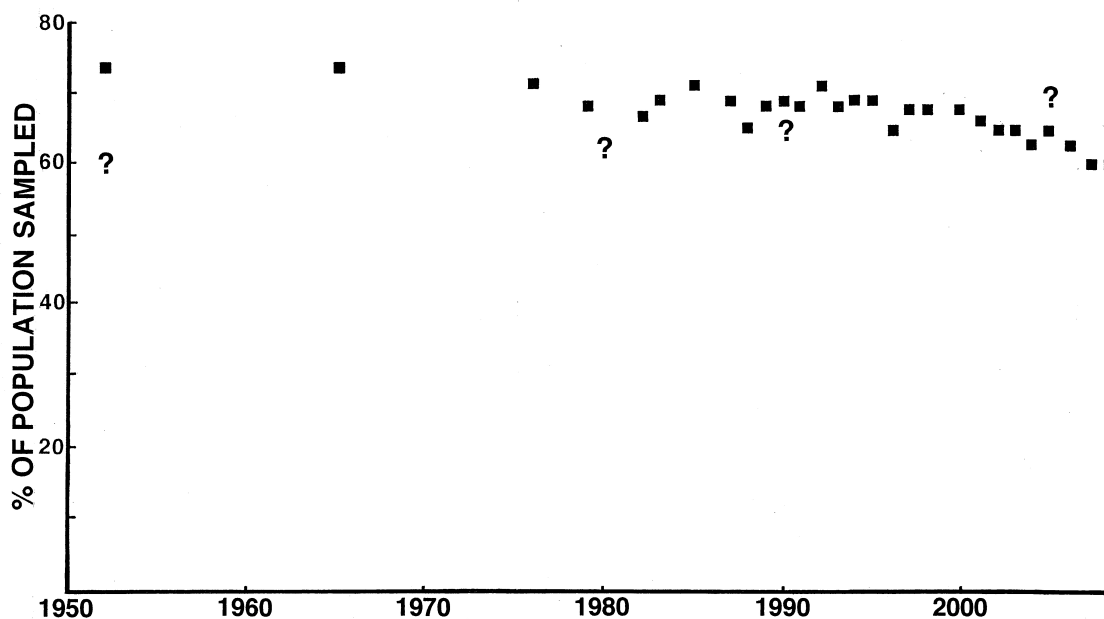
Finally, a recent survey has identified startling levels of religious mobility. Many contemporary Americans change denominations and even religions almost casually, suggesting that even among many who still hold traditional beliefs, dedication to their faith does not run deep.

Nor is this demographic meltdown still confined to the so-called mainline churches, as media accounts have long surmised. Today even conservative sects are suffering. A report by the Southern Baptist Church laments that “the denomination is on a path of slow but discernable deterioration” – this because it is baptizing the same absolute number of new members as it did fifty years ago, when the U.S. population was half its current size. Rates of baptism have fallen most dramatically among youth. As a result the largest conservative, creationist evangelical church is losing ground as a percentage of the population. Only a small and shrinking percentage of Americans lives what might be called a Bible-based lifestyle. According to Gallup, Americans who say they take the Bible literally have steadily declined, from four in ten thirty years ago to fewer than a third today. Meanwhile those who say they think holy books contain only legends and fables have soared, from one in ten to nearly a quarter. If these trends continue, Americans who think the Bible contains legends and fables will soon outnumber those who take it literally. Meanwhile, the number of Americans who accept the implications of evolutionary theory has been edging up (while the number who champion the literal Genesis story has remained static for several decades).



Gallup results: diamonds are those who accept evolution with or without the aid of God; circles are those accept evolution without intervention of God, inverted triangles are Bible literalists; upright triangles are Bible skeptics.

Is religious practice correspondingly waning? Baylor says no. Specifically, *What America Really Believes* repeats Rodney Stark's long-standing contention that church membership has climbed steadily from colonial times until today. The method Stark uses to produce these estimates is obscure; in particular, his claim that church membership has risen since the 1950s seems at odds with the exceptional religiosity of that decade. And how can Stark claim that church membership is on the upswing while simultaneously attributing the rise of the nones solely to expansion in the ranks of the unchurched? Which of these contradictory claims is correct? Fortunately, Gallup has long asked a consistently worded question on church membership. Let us now compare Stark against Gallup.



Squares are Gallup results which include about two percent synagogue membership, in some cases multiple surveys in a given year are consolidated, question marks are the Stark values.

It seems clear that Baylor researchers ignored a consistently gathered and abundant set of Gallup data which show that after holding steady for decades, church membership began a persistent and obvious decline starting in the 1970s – from almost 75 percent to 60 percent today. Baylor instead chose to favor the less-well-founded estimates by Stark, and chose also to accept his claim that his data has not been contradicted.

Studies intended to find out how many really go to church on a typical Sunday find fewer than a quarter of Americans actually make the effort, not the four in ten who commonly tell pollsters they attend. Baylor contends the real number is closer to one-third, though in a *Washington Times* interview even Stark admitted that this estimate is optimistic.

Baylor spotlights the megachurch phenomenon and implies that their large congregations offset secularizing influences elsewhere in the culture. But in fact megachurches make up only a very small fraction of total churches, and draw in just a few percent of the population each week. Against the torrent of Americans abandoning religion, they are a small stream indeed.

Church leaders who have a better hands-on sense of the crisis than the Baylor academics are increasingly distressed at another under-appreciated phenomenon: the growing feminization of the churches. Men increasingly begrudge spending part of their weekends in the pews; not even the megachurch entertainment centers designed to bring them back can stanch the bleeding. This loss of men is demographically critical because research shows that most children acquire their religiosity – or lack of it – from their fathers. Given all of this, we should not be surprised that Generation Y, the offspring of today’s church-averse fathers, is shaping up as the most irreligious generation in American history. And contrary to the claims by Baylor, generations do not tend to become more religious as they age, so it is likely that many of today’s young people will retain their secular perspective throughout life.

Religious belief and activity in America are trending downward in so many ways that it is simply untenable to pretend otherwise. Yet this is what Baylor maintains, virtually alone among major organizations that track Americans’ faith.

Pew, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), and Harris concur that America has now begun the same sort of secularization that already occurred in most other Western countries. America’s just starting late. Even the Gallup Organization has ceased to claim, as it did a few years ago, that American faith is on the rebound after declining from its high of the 1950s. The United States is still the most religious country in the first world, but the Baylor thesis that “faith American style” is holding its own is clearly false.

## **The First World’s Loss of Faith**

Throughout the world’s other prosperous democracies, nontheism commands greater popular allegiance than in America. It’s a powerful idea, this observation that the entire rest of the first world is turning from religion, and it’s understandable that Baylor researchers would seek to minimize it. They do so by relying on one of the same strategies we saw them use to downplay the importance of irreligion at home: they minimize the impact of nontheism abroad by focusing disingenuously on atheism, strictly defined. For example, much is made of a World Values Survey (WVS) finding that only 14 percent of the French are atheists. But the Baylor team fails to mention the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), administered around the same time. It found more atheists – 19 percent of its French respondents did not believe in God. But that’s just the beginning: another 18 percent of the French were agnostic. That’s 37 percent who are atheist *or* agnostic. An additional 15 percent said they believe in a higher power, but not the



traditional god. In total, that means 52 percent of the French are at least skeptical of the traditional God concept. Baylor also ignored a 2006 Harris Poll that ranked about one-third of the French as outright atheists, another third as agnostics, and revealed that of the believers left over, almost as many are Muslim as Christian.

We see similar trends – and similar statistical distortion by Baylor researchers – with other first world countries. Take Sweden. Baylor again spotlights the World Values Survey finding that just 6 percent of Swedes are atheists. Yet ten years ago, the ISSP tallied 17 percent unbelievers, 18 percent doubters in a higher power and God, and 33 percent believers in a higher power but not God. All told, the ISSP found that *two-thirds* of Swedes were at least skeptical of a supreme being. (Some polls put it even higher, at eight in ten.)

In the table below, WVS figures for 18 countries (relied on by Baylor) are compared with ISSP statistics; to ranges of likely atheism and agnosticism compiled and published by Pitzer College sociologist Phil Zuckerman; and relevant results of the 2006 Harris Poll mentioned above.

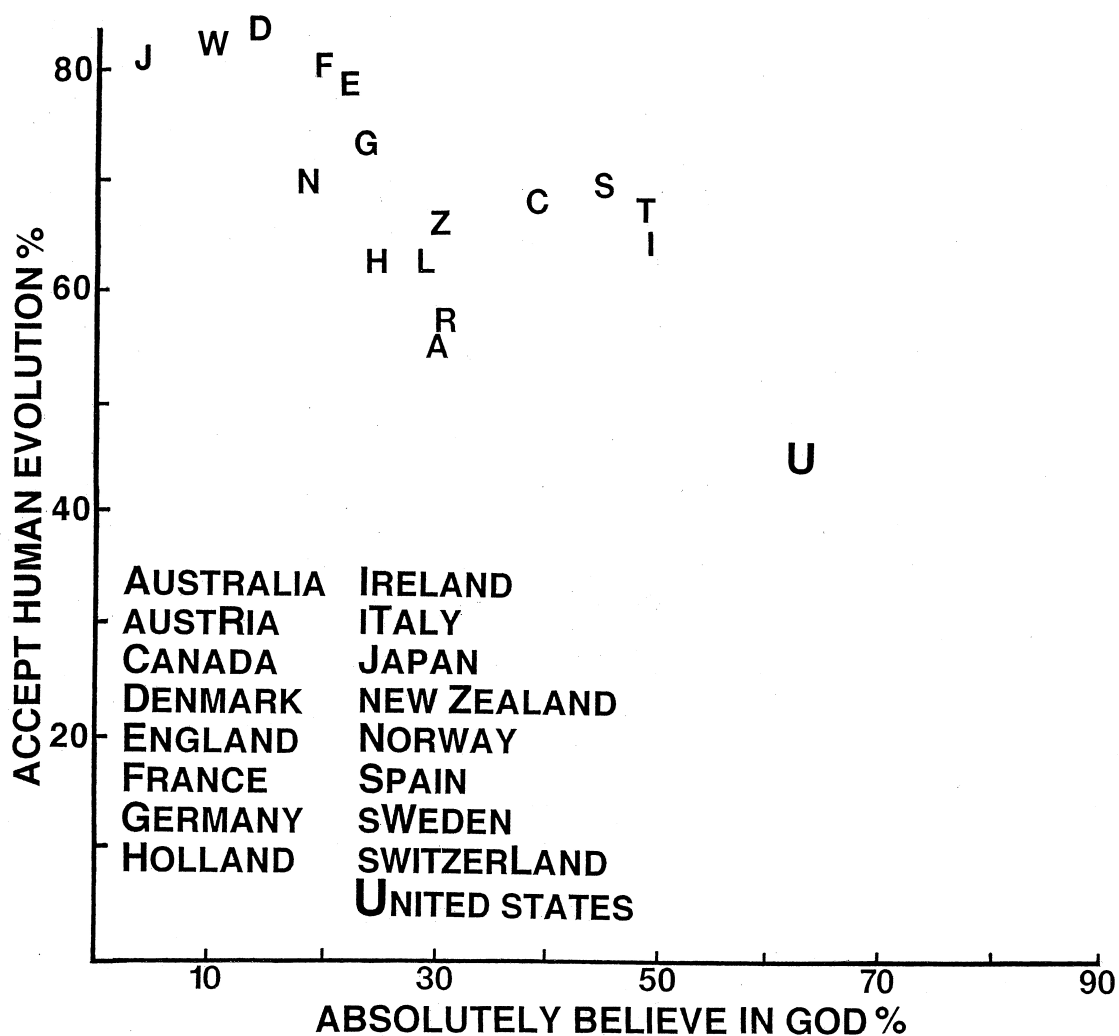
	WVS - turn of the century - ISSP				God = skeptics	Other assorted surveys (Harris 2006 <b>bold</b> ) atheists + agnostics
	convinced atheists	don't believe +	don't know +	higher power only		
Japan	12	11	21	24	56	65
Sweden	6	17	18	33	68	64-85
Norway	4	12	12	25	49	48-80
Denmark	5	15	16	24	55	48-80
Finland	3					41-60
Holland	6	17	12	18	47	42-44
Belgium	7					43
France	3	19	18	14	51	44- <b>68</b>
Germany	7	24	12	20	56	41- <b>49</b>
Switzerland	4	4	12	30	46	17-27
England	5	10	16	14	40	32- <b>59</b>
Canada	4	9	8	18	35	19-30
Australia	5	10	14	16	40	25
New Zealand	5	8	11	19	38	
Austria	2	7	8	25	40	18-26
Spain	6	9	7	12	28	<b>44</b>
Italy	3	4	5	7	16	<b>30</b>
Ireland	2	2	4	7	13	

WVS statistics under-report irreligion, but they don't even do that consistently. The WVS data contains various defects: for example, the still-moderately religious Spain displays as much atheism as countries which all other surveys show to be much less religious, such as the Nordic nations. In its discussion of irreligion across the world, then, the Baylor team has decided to rely on the *least* reliable data set available.

The statistics Baylor researchers disregard depict a first world in which belief in God has declined markedly ever since World War II. Levels of belief in angels, heaven, hell, and have fallen similarly. Church attendance is down too, often by a factor of four or more. In many western nations the percentage attending church on any given Sunday is only in the single digits. Across Europe great numbers of churches have closed or been converted to alternative uses.

Consider that when *Saturday Night Live* premiered in 1975, Spain was still a fascist state dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. Today Spain is a fast-secularizing nation that permits gay marriage. Belief in God is “on life support” in irreligious Scandinavia and Japan. The unprecedented, rapid, and *voluntary* secularization of western Europe, Canada, Australia, and Japan is one of the most striking sociological events in world history. Among many other things, it proves that religion is neither constant nor a human universal. Human beings can live without religion, and when social circumstances encourage it many do. Yet the Baylor team misses it all.

In none of the secularized democracies does a majority absolutely believe in God; in some the percentage reporting absolute belief is in the teens or lower:



Data from ISSP and Eurobarometer.

It is not surprising that Pew ranks the religiosity of each of the secular democracies well below 1 on its 3-point international scale. As we've seen, this is only one among a great many relevant statistics that Baylor researchers did not feel necessary to include in their work.

For more on the extent of first-world secularization, the reader is directed to two seminal books: *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* by Steve Bruce (Blackwell, 2002). Not surprisingly, these works receive no attention from the Baylor team.

### **Better Religious than Red?**

A favorite thesis among conservative Christians is that Communist-bloc nations never succeeded at wringing religion from their societies, and that piety has experienced dramatic renewal since the Iron Curtain fell. The Baylor team enthusiastically agrees. Ignored is a mass of data (comprising an entire chapter in Norris and Inglehart's *Sacred and Secular*) that exposes the post-communist revival of religion as a gross exaggeration. This myth is based in turn on still more highly dubious statistics, which Baylor researchers predictably treats as sound and sufficient. Some former east-bloc nations are actually undergoing a degree of secularization, including even Poland. On the other hand, there has been a modest rise of faith in China, with Christianity making some inroads. Yet the mere few percent of Chinese who are Christian remain far outnumbered by outright atheists, even according to the data Baylor cites. In addition there is evidence that many Chinese converts approach Christianity primarily as a fashionable vehicle for emulating western lifestyles. On balance, religion survived less well under Communist oppression – and rebounded less vigorously afterward – than many advocates (and the Baylor researchers) suppose.

### **What's Baylor's Game?**

The evidence for secularization across the West – including, belatedly, America – is so compelling that most survey organizations have long since acknowledged it. The Baylor team stands virtually alone in bucking this consensus, using selective data in order to defend a false contention that religious belief is on the rise. Perhaps in service to Baylor University's roots as a conservative Baptist institution, BISR now operates more as a religious propaganda organization than as the objective research institution it still purports to be.

Baylor's strategy seems tailored to counter the periodic releases of large studies by Pew, NORC, and others that document the erosion of piety in American life. Every two years Baylor/Gallup release a report that purports to demonstrate the stability of religion. So long as the media accepts Baylor's claims, the strategy is working. It may become less effective in coming years as the secularization of America becomes too obvious to ignore.

## The Stark Factor

To understand what is going wrong at Baylor, we must consider its star sociologist. Rodney Stark is the lead author of the book that contains the bulk of the organization's 2008 results. At various times Stark has described himself as a reluctant agnostic or as unchurched independent Christian. He is well-known for his hypothesis that religiosity is a nearly universal phenomenon present in all societies, and for a market-based hypothesis that views religion as fulfilling a number of worldly human needs which no other factor can address. Stark has engendered widespread controversy and generated significant antagonism among fellow researchers, both by his style and by the methods he has used to sustain his conclusions. Stark's writings and public statements tend to be sharply dismissive of those who disagree with him, especially nontheists. In a *Washington Times* article covering the Baylor study, Stark said that "religious people don't care about the irreligious people, but the irreligious are prickly. I think they're just angry."

In the technical literature Stark has been sharply criticized for being selective in choosing data that support his hypotheses, which have failed in many cases under more objective scrutiny.\*

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\* Stark is perhaps best known for the free-market hypothesis, a popular "explanation" of why America remains devout while Europe has become so secular. This hypothesis holds that America's constitutional separation of church and state compelled clerics to engage in Darwinian competition with one another to keep parishioners happy and paying for the pews, while the lazy, socialistic, state-operated churches of Europe grew lax and wasted away. Amazingly, this theory owes much of its early acceptance to one of the greatest mathematical faux pas in the history of sociology. The statistical studies that initially established the free-market theory – by Rodney Stark and his coauthor Roger Finke – contained an egregious coding error: a key formula contained a -1 rather than the correct positive +1. As a result, the seemingly seminal results around which so much speculation has been constructed are invalid! The error was revealed by David Voas, V. A. Olson, and Alasdair Crockett in a 2002 paper, "Religious Pluralism and Participation: Why Previous Research Is Wrong" (*American Sociological Review* 67(2): 212-230). Even before that damning error was uncovered, Mark Chavez (coauthor of a famed 1993 study showing that actual church attendance is 50 percent lower than Americans self-report in surveys) and Philip S. Gorski had published a devastating 2001 meta-analysis of more than two dozen studies claimed to support the free-market hypothesis, concluding that "the claim that religious pluralism and religious participation are generally and positively associated ... is not supported, and attempts to discredit countervailing evidence on methodological grounds must be rejected" ("Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27: 261-281). The controversy was briefly summarized by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in their *Sacred and Secular* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), a work accessible to popular audiences that deserves wider attention than it received. Sadly, while specialists have largely rejected the free market hypothesis, it continues to be relied on in popular discourse – including not a few essays by secularists who still trot it out as though it could explain America's exceptional level of public piety.

*What America Really Believes* provides an extreme expression of Stark's tendency to disregard inconvenient data. The book simply makes no mention of ten years' worth of major publications that contradict Stark's research and demonstrate the decline of religious faith across much of the world. Far from attempting to rebut these works, Stark and his co-authors simply write as if they did not exist. Stark also cites outdated work that supports his agenda, such as a 1980 study suggesting that nonreligious individuals tend to become more religious as they age, ignoring more recent work that concludes the opposite.

To what degree is Rodney Stark is the direct cause of Baylor study's failure to engage with so much well-regarded data and analysis? It may be impossible to know. But as Stark is the lead author of *What America Believes*, it seems reasonable to hold him as responsible as his university for this faulty study.

### **It's Not Just Baylor**

Baylor is not the only pro-Christian organization engaged in surveying American religion. The Gallup Organization bears the impress of its devout founder, George Gallup. His son, George Gallup Jr., is a committed evangelical Christian who once said of polling on religion, "When I ask a question on these subjects, what I'm always trying to find out is: 'Are we doing the will of God?'" Gallup is no longer in charge of the organization, and in any cases its biases have never been expressed as overtly as Baylor's. The Organization no longer posts commentaries arguing that American religion is on the rise. Still, Gallup has done less than other major survey organizations to acknowledge that long-term trend data clearly shows declines in theistic belief and practice. The rise of skeptics, declines in church membership, and for that matter the gradual increase in the number of Americans who embrace the theory of evolution go largely unmentioned on.

George Barna, founder of the Barna Group, is entirely open about his conservative Christian worldview. Some observers believe this has occasionally influenced the group's interpretation of results. Still, Barna usually follows the facts. It has willingly acknowledged outcomes unfavorable the conservative Christian agenda. For instance, it was the Barna Group that demonstrated that born-again Christian couples have high rates of divorce.

If three major players in the world of opinion research show at least some favoritism toward Christianity, other prominent survey institutions have a neutral posture in matters of religion. No

institution in this sector has an atheistic orientation. Therefore the overall orientation of this field of research is somewhat biased in favor of faith.

### **Why Is the Baylor Problem Important?**

Disputes among survey institutions are not just academic. Nor is their relevance limited to the struggle between nontheism and theism. Understanding whether or not the United States is or is not secularizing is vital to understanding the future political and socioeconomic course of the nation. If Americans become less religious, they may well begin to remake their social and economic system more along the lines of other first world countries. If America becomes more like Europe, making its social safety net more robust and reducing levels of uncertainty experience by the middle class, current research suggests that this will further reduce popular piety. Indeed, this is just the “secularization feedback loop” that has already eroded popular religiosity in every highly developed country other than the United States.

### **Recommendations –**

#### *-- to Baylor University and Gallup*

If Baylor University wishes to be perceived in future as a credible source of advanced, objective research and information, the institution needs to require that its Institute for Studies of Religion reform its program to meet modern mainstream standards of scientific rigor. The Gallup Organization, too, will be seen as more objective if it more openly acknowledges well-established secularizing trends.

#### *-- to the Media*

Because of the above-cited problems in Baylor’s religion-study project, until reforms are undertaken it is suggested that reporters and commentators adopt a more skeptical stance toward its often-anachronistic reports. Media professionals should recognize that other major survey and analytical organizations such as Harris, NORC, Pew, and ISSP have displayed greater objectivity than Baylor/Gallup and their products should be considered more reliable. When reporting on the Baylor work, other researchers should be consulted, many are listed below.

*To Learn More – (significant resources, none of which are cited by the Baylor team)*

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) is a critical read for all truly interested in this subject. Also a font of information, Steve Bruce's *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) shows that Britain is probably even less religious than the statistics indicate.

Gregory Paul, "The Big Religion Questions Finally Solved" in the Dec 2008/Jan 2009 *Free Inquiry* builds upon recent advances in the sociology of religion to lay out the socioeconomic forces that predominantly drive first world secularization and account for the (quite variable) popularity of mass faith over the ages.

Gregory Paul, "The Secular Revolution of the West," *Free Inquiry* 22, no. 3 (summer 2002) 28-34; Gregory Paul, "Foreign Policy's Faux Pas," *Free Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (Dec 2007/Jan 2008): 41-44; Gregory Paul and Phil Zuckerman, "Why the Gods Are Not Winning," *Edge* (2007), [www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/paul07/paul07\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/paul07/paul07_index.html); the last two take a closer look at the state of faith and secularism in formerly communist and other nations based on some of the latest data.

Phil Zuckerman, "Atheism: Contemporary Rates and Patterns," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007); and Phil Zuckerman, "Secularization: Europe -- yes, United States -- no" *Skeptical Inquirer* 28(2) (2004): 49-52 include many of the survey statistics that establish the depth of first-world secularism.

Gregory Paul, "Creationism in Decline" *New Scientist* (2008), [www.newscientist.com/article/mg19826501.000-creationism-in-decline.html](http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg19826501.000-creationism-in-decline.html); "Expelled Expired: Creationism Is Not Winning" *EnergyGrid* (2008), [energygrid.com/society/2008/05gp-creationists.html](http://energygrid.com/society/2008/05gp-creationists.html).

Gregory Paul, "Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health With Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies," *Journal of Religion and Society* 7 (2005), [moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html](http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html) explores the social consequences of western secularization, as does Phil Zuckerman "Is Faith Good for Us?" *Free Inquiry* (Aug/Sept 2006).



Penny Edgell et al. "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society." *American Sociological Review* (2006) 71: 211-234 demonstrate the discriminatory attitudes that intimidate Americans from acknowledging their irreligiosity.

Harold Taylor, "While Most Americans Believe in God, Only 36 percent Attend a Religious Service Once a Month or More," (2003), [www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/index.asp?PID=408](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=408) explains the problem of measuring American nonbelievers, and the steps Harris took to overcome them and record the large body of religious skeptics. Religious Views and Beliefs Vary Greatly by Country, According to the Latest Financial Times/Harris Poll, (2006), [www.harrisinteractive.com/NEWS/allnewsbydate.asp?NewsID=1130](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NEWS/allnewsbydate.asp?NewsID=1130) verifies the results of the prior study, plus the even greater secularization of other first world countries.

Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (2008) [religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-full.pdf](http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-full.pdf) and Pew Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987-2007, (2007), [people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=312](http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=312) document the national trend towards secular opinion.

Tom Smith & Seokho Kim discuss the NORC data showing that Amerofaith is declining as the nonreligious rise in "The Vanishing Protestant Majority," *GSS Social Change Report* 14 (2004), [www.norc.uchicago.edu/issues/PROTSG08.pdf](http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/issues/PROTSG08.pdf). In "The Decline of Religious Identity in the United States," *Institute for Jewish & Community Research* (2004), [www.Jewishresearch.org/PDFs/religion.pdf](http://www.Jewishresearch.org/PDFs/religion.pdf), Sid Groeneman & Gary Tobin explore the demographic factors behind the decline.

W. Haug and P. Warner "The Demographic Characteristics of the Linguistic and Religious groups in Switzerland." *Population Studies* (2000) 31, R. Low "The Truth About Men & Church." *Touchstone* (2003) [www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-05-024-v](http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-05-024-v), and H. Brinton. "Praying for More Men." *The Washington Post* (2004) 12/19, B4 explain how the loss of the men is damaging western and American faith.

Penny Marler and C. Hadaway. "Testing the Attendance Gap in a Conservative Church," *Sociology of Religion* (1999) 60:175-186 and Stanley Presser and Linda Stesson "Data Collection Mode and Social Desirability Bias in Self-Reported Religious Attendance," *American Sociological Review*. (1998) 63:137-145 show that actual church attendance is much lower than indicated in surveys.

Jacqueline Salmon, "Southern Baptists Struggle to Maintain Flock," *The Washington Post* (2008) 6/8, Thom Rainer, "A Resurgence Not Yet Realized: Evangelistic Effectiveness in the Southern Baptist Convention Since 1979," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (2005) 9(1): 54-69.

Jonathan Gruber and Daniel Hungerman, "The Church Vs. the Mall: What Happens When Religion Faces Increased Secular Competition?" National Bureau of Economic Research, (2006), [papers.nber.org/papers/w12410.pdf](http://papers.nber.org/papers/w12410.pdf) details the consequences of the repeal of the Blue Laws by retailers.

Gallup Brain, American Beliefs: Evolution vs. Bible's Explanation of Human Origins (2006), Twenty-Eight Percent Believe Bible is Actual Word of God (2006), One-Third of Americans Believe the Bible is Literally True (2007), Majority of Republicans Doubt Theory of Evolution (2007), plus the latest polls, show the decline of Bible literalism in favor of popular support for evolution.