

Surprising results from an exclusive PARADE poll

# How Spiritual Are We?

—by Christine Wicker

**A**MERICA IS GENERALLY thought to be among the most religious nations in the Western world. We Americans are often portrayed as people who believe in God, pray often, and teach our children to do the same. All true, confirms PARADE's new national poll on spirituality.

But our faith is also far more complex than these stereotypes: PARADE's survey reveals a nation looking heavenward—but with its feet firmly planted on the ground of modern life. Spiritually speaking, Americans are a very practical people, moderate and tolerant in ways that would have astonished our grandparents.

Our nation was built on a foundation of strong faith, and in some respects, that hasn't changed. In fact, 69% of Americans believe in God, 77% pray outside of religious services, and 75% believe it's a parent's responsibility to give children a religious upbringing. But even though 45% of respondents called themselves religious, 50% said they rarely or never attend worship services.

More than a quarter (27%) of respondents said they don't practice any kind of religion. As books with titles like *God Is Not Great* and *The God Delusion* have climbed the best-seller lists in recent years, sociologists have speculated about a new atheism in the U.S. No such thing, according to PARADE's survey—only 5% of respondents didn't believe in God, 7% weren't sure about the existence of God, and 12% didn't believe in an afterlife.

What Americans are doing today is separat-

ing spirituality from religion, with many people disavowing organized practice altogether while privately maintaining some form of worship. The old terms—"atheist" and "agnostic"—are no longer catch-alls for everyone outside traditional belief. In fact, 24% of respondents put themselves into a whole new category: "spiritual but not religious."

That phrase means different things to different people. Some may be members of traditional religions but want to signal that they aren't legalistic or rigid. At the other end of the spectrum, "spiritual but not religious" can apply to someone who has combined diverse beliefs and practices into a personal faith that fits no standard definition.

## AS AMERICANS' IDEAS

of spirituality have become more expansive, so have their attitudes toward people of different faiths. Even though the notion that one's own religion is the sole means of "salvation" has launched a million missionaries from this country's shores, today only a small fraction are so fervent. A scant 12%

of respondents said that their own religion was the only true faith, 12% said no religion has validity, and 59% said all religions are valid.

While respondents were open-minded, they were far from carried away. Although 82% would consider marrying someone of a different faith, a nearly equal number (78%) would never think of converting to another religion.

When it comes to religion's place in their lives, Americans showed a measured and even practical outlook. The largest percentage (33%) said religion was important but not the most important thing. The most religious and least religious respondents balanced each other—24% said religion was the most important thing in their lives and 22% said it wasn't a factor at all. Another 22% said religion was in their lives but not particularly important.

A FOCUS ON PRACTICALITY also emerged when respondents weighed in on what mattered to

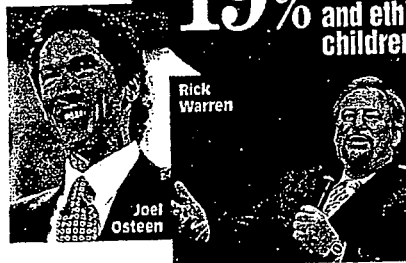
them most about their own religions. The 40% who picked "I believe it is a source of truth" were out-

## Religion's Purpose

40% say it holds the truth

22% say that religion has no place in their lives

19% say it helps teach morals and ethics to children



Rick Warren

Joel Osteen

numbered by people with more everyday expectations. Close to one in five (19%) picked customs, traditions, and holidays as the most important part of their religion; another 19% chose teaching morals and ethics to their children; and 8% picked a sense of community. About 14% said that their religion's most important quality was that it makes them feel safe and secure.

Fear of God is another staple of religious belief that is no longer as pervasive as it once was. In previous eras, Americans were on their knees nightly, convinced that they had to pray because a higher power demanded it. That conviction has largely evaporated. Although 51% of respondents said they pray daily, only 15% of those who pray said they do so because God expects them to. A much larger percentage (67%) said they pray because it brings them comfort and hope.

What are they asking for? Lots of things—72% pray for the well-being of others, 60% for forgiveness, 27% for personal success, and 21% for money or other material things.

**ASA CONCRETE MEASURE OF RELIGIOUS** commitment, nothing beats counting how many bodies show up to worship every week. So how often do Americans attend religious services? Thirty percent said they attend once or more in a given week. But keep in mind that academic researchers who actually count the number of participants believe that only up to one-half of those who claim to be in their houses of worship are actually there.

Twenty percent of respondents said they go to services anywhere from once a month to a few times a year. Combine them with the 50% who rarely or never attend, and an interesting contrast appears. Although 45% of respondents

considered themselves religious, 70% of them said they participate in organized religion sporadically or not at all. That means one-third of the people who identified themselves as religious were only minimally connected to traditional worship.

That's not good news for the clergy. When respondents were asked whom they would turn to for guidance with a problem, 17% said they would go to a spiritual leader. The majority—55%—would lean on family members.

How has the recession affected Americans' religious practices? During past financial downturns, many people reacted by returning to the religious fold. This time, the reverse seems to be happening. Just 7% of respondents said they were attending

religious services more often, and 10% of respondents said they've been going less frequently since the recession began.

**CONSIDERING AMERICANS'** tolerance and practicality, they might be expected to have soured on religion's role in international affairs. Here, respondents showed a balance of opinions—59% said faith can help solve the world's problems and offer hope to the suffering, while 41% said religion has too often led to war and suffering.

Does that mean religion and politics should mix? The answer was a decisive no. Just 15% thought religion should be a key factor in political decisions, while 58% said religion and politics should not mix at all.

Americans were even more opinionated when asked about the kind of esoteric spiritual ideas that fill many TV shows

and movies. Two-thirds of respondents said they've never met with mediums or psychics, had a psychic experience, or even watched a psychic or medium on TV. Surprisingly, astrology fared even worse—a mere 12% believe in it and check their horoscopes regularly. The rest don't believe in astrology at all or read horoscopes purely for fun.

Regarding contact with the deceased, respondents were similarly skeptical. Eighty-three percent have had no experiences with the spirit of anyone who has passed away, while 17% believe they have. Extrasensory perception rated even lower—9% claimed they have psychic abilities.

**RESPONDENTS WERE MORE INCLINED** to adhere to traditional ideas about the afterlife, but they didn't give those beliefs overwhelming endorsement either. Fewer than half (43%) thought people go to heaven or hell depending on their actions on earth. However, the notion that souls live on and will meet after death got a better reception, with 62% expecting that when they die, they will join loved ones who have passed away before them.

Spirituality also plays a role in our entertainment choices. There, too, Americans

veered away from the mystical and weird. When asked

to pick their favorite of these films involving spirituality—*The Da Vinci Code*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Ghost*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*—one out of every four people selected

*The Ten Commandments*. It was the hands-down winner, showing us that old-time religion

still rules supreme and unchallenged—at least at the movies. **B**

*Christine Wicker has written four books about faith and spirituality. Her latest is "The Fall of the Evangelical Nation."*

## Reasons We Pray

72% pray for the well-being of others

60% pray for forgiveness

21% pray for material things



How important is spirituality to you? Take our poll and see the full results at [Parade.com/spiritual](http://Parade.com/spiritual)

## Our New Beliefs

82% would marry someone of a different faith

59% say that all religions are valid

24% say they are spiritual but not religious

Watch CBS Sunday Morning Oct. 4 at 9 a.m. (EDT) to see more on the PARADE poll and spirituality in America