

PEW RELIGION SURVEY IS SKEWED

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on a new Pew Research survey on religion:

The validity of a survey often turns on the precise wording of questions. Indeed, it is possible to construct two different sets of questions for the same respondents on the same subject and generate two different outcomes.

For instance, if the goal is to show how tolerant liberals are of diversity in education, it makes sense to ask questions about the demographic makeup of the faculty. If the goal is to show how intolerant liberals are of diversity in education, it makes sense to ask questions about the ideological makeup of the faculty.

An honest survey would include both sets of questions, then asking, which should matter more in higher education—the demographic or ideological diversity of the faculty?

The Pew survey recently released, “In U.S., Far More Support Than Oppose Separation of Church and State,” is skewed to make liberals look more tolerant than conservatives.

For example, respondents were asked to choose between the following: “Cities and towns in the U.S. should be allowed to place religious symbols on public property OR Cities and towns in the U.S. should keep religious symbols off public property.”

The questions are disingenuous. It is illegal for cities or towns to place religious symbols on *some* public property venues, but not others, and it matters whether the municipality owns the symbols or whether some religious entity does. It may also matter whether the religious symbols have to be surrounded by secular symbols.

For instance, if the site of the religious symbol is near the seat of government, such as inside or outside city hall, they can only be erected if adorned by secular symbols. Why? Because otherwise the average person could conclude that the government is endorsing religion. If, however, the site is a public forum—a place like a city park where freedom of speech is open to everyone—then no secular symbols need to be placed near the religious ones.

In other words, by asking whether a government agency can place religious symbols on public property, the question is skewed against doing so (even so, 39% said yes and 35% said no). It would have been more enlightening to ask whether private citizens should be allowed to place religious symbols on public property, especially in venues that are open to everyone.

Similarly, respondents were asked if teachers in public schools should be allowed to lead students in Christian prayers. This is a seriously skewed question.

By law, teachers cannot lead students in prayer, but it is legal for students to lead other students in prayer on school grounds. That, of course, was not what was asked. Also, there was no need to inject Christianity into the debate. Respondents could have been asked if they think teachers should allow students to open the day with a prayer (of their choosing). But that would get in the way of the narrative.

As always, Democrats, Jews and those with no religious affiliation are the least likely to support the public expression of religion (atheists are the most hostile); Republicans and Christians are the most likely. The survey authors, of course, do not use terms such as “the public expression of religion”; they prefer phrases such as “separation of church and state.”

The term “separation of church and state” is itself in need of

explaining. Religious bodies are given federal funds to run their charities. Is that a violation of church and state lines, and should that be illegal?

Pew says it is grateful to Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, authors of "Taking America Back to God: Christian Nationalism in the United States," for their input. It certainly shows.

I wrote about their book in the October issue of *Catalyst*, our monthly journal. I have something in common with these men: I, too, am a sociologist. However, we see the world through an entirely different lens.

To cite one example, they argue that if someone believes the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are divinely inspired documents, that proves they are Christian nationalists. Tagging such people with this pernicious term is simply irresponsible. Indeed, it evinces an animus.

Pew has done very fine work, overall. This survey is not among its best.