STATE OF RELIGION IN 2013

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Frank Newport, *God is Alive and Well*, Gallup Press

Gallup has been probing the status of religion in America since the 1940s, and has done some of the finest work of any survey house in the nation. This book is the work of Frank Newport, Gallup Editor-in-Chief. As readers of *Catalyst* know, I hold a Ph.D. in sociology from New York University; Newport's Ph.D. in sociology is from the University of Michigan. Unlike most sociologists, Newport writes with clarity.

There has been much talk in recent years about the increasing diversity of the American population. Indeed, we have an entire diversity industry in this country, one that spawns the private and public sectors. It's really a subset of the multicultural behemoth, and it comes with so many base assumptions that it takes on the trappings of religion itself. Many of those assumptions, it turns out, are wrong.

We may not be a "Christian nation" in any formal sense, but we are a nation that is still dominated by Christians. Indeed, 80 percent of Americans are Christian; 16 percent have no religious identification (more about this later). What about all those new religions we hear so much about from the diversity experts? They exist, but are inconsequential: fully 95 percent of those Americans who profess a religious affiliation are Christian.

Here's another way of looking at it. Of the five percent of those who have a religion and who are not Christian, 1.7 percent are Jews; 1.7 percent are Mormons; .5 percent are Muslims; the rest are other non-Christian. In terms of our religious beliefs, there has also been more constancy than we have been led to believe. While fewer Americans today believe

in God as compared to the mid-1940s, the difference is small. Indeed, today only 6-8 percent say there is no God.

For us Catholics, the biggest change has been the large increase in the Hispanic population; Mexicans account for much of it. “An astounding 45% of Catholics younger than 30 are Hispanic,” Newport observes. He is right to say that the Catholic Church would be in trouble today were it not for the Hispanic surge: we’ve lost a large percentage of cradle Catholics.

Switching religions is not uncommon, and this is especially true among Protestants. More important is the loss of numbers recorded by the mainline denominations; Methodists and Presbyterians have lost half their members since 1967. Overall, we’ve never had fewer Protestants as a portion of the country (they are just over half the nation’s population). Moreover, the term itself is losing traction: fewer Americans who are non-Catholic Christians identify themselves as Protestant.

Jews are mostly non-observant; only a third adhere to their faith. Blacks are the most religious, and they are also culturally conservative. The Republican Party is stacked with churchgoers, and the Democrats are more closely aligned with those of a secularist orientation (blacks being a noticeable exception). Jews and Episcopalians are at the top of the education and income ladder; Baptists, Pentecostals, and Assemblies of God members are at the bottom; Catholics are in between. One in three Jews makes $90,000 a year or more, which is double the national average. Mormons are more likely to be college graduates than are Protestants or Catholics.

The most religious states are in the South (Mississippi is number one); the least religious are in the Northeast and the West (the residents of Vermont are the least likely to attend church). The states with the highest “no religion” percentages are Oregon, Vermont, Washington, Alaska, Maine, Hawaii, and

Colorado. Highly religious states are gaining population, led by Texas, Utah and Georgia.

Newport does a fine job exploring social issues that are impacted by age. As expected, the older we get, the more likely we are to be religious. Whether this will hold true for baby boomers (they are more secular than previous generations), remains to be seen.

The problem with young people has less to do with religion than with marriage. To wit: Fewer young people are marrying and birth rates are declining. This does not bode well for the future, and there appears to be little national discussion of this issue. Not only do public office holders shun the subject, even the clergy have been reluctant to mention it. It is a tribute to the reigning narcissism of our age that children are often seen as an impediment to happiness (dogs are more welcome with young urbanites than children).

Women are more religious than men, and this is something that has been true for an awfully long time. This is not just a sweeping generalization. As Newport demonstrates, “The overall gender gap in religiousness appears in *all* major race and ethnic groups in the U.S.” (His italic.) Meaning that white, black, Hispanic and Asian women are more religious than men in their respective racial or ethnic group. Interestingly, this phenomenon is true in other countries as well.

As with other sociological phenomenon, there is a divide between single women and married women, especially married women with children. Women with children are clearly more religious than women without children, and this has nothing to do with age. “When a woman has a child,” Newport writes, “the maternal instinct and the religion that goes with it may be accelerated.” He then notes as a “confounding fact” that men with a child in the home are more religious than men without a child in the home.

However, the “children’s gap” that Newport pinpoints may easily be understood as stemming from the same source: for most men and women, achieving the status of parent is transformative, both psychologically and sociologically. Fathers and mothers surely express their protectiveness in different ways, but one way they come together is in their newly forged interest in the alembic qualities of religion for their offspring. To put it differently, parenting is an inherently protective enterprise for both men and women.

After detailing that women are more religious than men, Newport opines that the increasing role of women clergy in the mainline Protestant denominations, and the absence of female priests in Catholic and conservative Protestant faiths, suggests that the latter may find themselves with increasing tensions. But it is precisely in the mainline churches that fewer and fewer *women as well as men* are attending services. We know from many studies that the more conservative the religion, the lower the dropout rate; conversely, the more a religion’s teachings mirror the secular ideas of the dominant culture, the more members it loses. If religions with women clergy are the key to success, then the Episcopalians should be booming. In fact, they are in a deep descent.

There has been much chatter about the “nones,” the category of Americans who claim no religious affiliation. Celebrating this phenomenon have been activists in the atheist community, as well as many religion reporters. It is a credit to Newport that he carefully examines the spike in the “nones” population.

Contrary to what many secular pundits have said, it is not true that the 16 percent of Americans who have no religious identification are atheists or anti-religionists. Indeed, roughly half of them profess a belief in God. Newport suspects, with good reason, that the large increase in the “nones” may mask something else: it may very well be that in the 1950s, for example, that those who lacked a religious

affiliation were less likely to identify themselves as such (there is comparatively little social pressure today exerted on those who are not religious to claim affiliation).

Does it matter whether someone is religious or not? Most decisively, and not just for individuals—it matters for society. The most religious among us are also happier and healthier than the least religious. Healthier not just physically, but emotionally: those who are "very religious" are the least likely to suffer depression, and the least likely to experience stress. In short, the overall wellbeing score sorts out this way: at the top are the "very religious"; in the middle are the "moderately religious"; at the bottom are the "nonreligious."

Newport's explanation makes good sense. The "very religious" are more likely to take care of themselves, more likely to find solace in their religion in times of need, and more likely to experience a strong sense of community with their co-believers. This holds true across religions.

What is perhaps the most controversial part of the book, and also the most fun to read, is Newport's discussion on how the business community and government might tap into the strongly positive role that religion has on wellbeing. He is correct to note that business and government are quick to recommend that we stop smoking, start exercising more, eat a more healthy diet, and the like. Should they not be just as vociferous in offering incentives for employees to become more religious? I would take it further: If those of us who take our religion seriously are less likely to be a healthcare burden on others, should we not be rewarded in some way?

The idea is sound, but finding a way to implement it is not easy. Corporate America may find itself in a pickle trying to negotiate a workable proposal, and the problems for government include serious First Amendment issues. But we could have a combined PR campaign: If the captains of industry and leaders

in government were to use the bully pulpit exhorting Americans to take religion more seriously, it could pay huge dividends. At the very least, it would make us a more religion-friendly nation, something we badly need.

Although it is not a subject Newport addresses, related to his analysis of the "very religious" is the role these men and women play in serving the dispossessed. We know from the work of Arthur C. Brooks, as well as Robert Putman and David Campbell, that those who are religious give more in terms of their time and money to the needy than secularists do. The 2012 survey by the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* also underscored this vital point. It cannot be said too often that those who holler the loudest about the horrors of poverty do the least about it. Their idea of helping the poor means picking the pocket of the taxpayer, not coughing up their own dough.

So if we take Newport's evidence of the social benefits that the "very religious" offer, and splice it to the data on their charitable giving, what we have is a strong case for promoting religion throughout our society. In other words, the hostility to religion as expressed by many cultural elites is not only offensive, it is socially injurious.

Anyone interested in this subject will find much to savor in Newport's well-written, and highly authoritative, account.