# PEW RELIGION SURVEY IS SKEWED

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.

If the survey was honest, it 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, "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 such as 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 to support it. 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, the authors of Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States, for their input. It certainly shows.
Bill Donohue wrote about their book in the October issue of Catalyst. He has something in common with these men: He's also a sociologist. However, Donohue sees 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.

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# VP HARRIS CAMPAIGNS IN CHURCHES

The IRS has guidelines that tax-exempt organizations must follow regarding electoral politics. While those who work in the non-profit sector may address the issues, they are forbidden from endorsing candidates for public office.

No matter, Vice President Kamala Harris showed her contempt for these norms during the run-up to the November elections. She had videotaped a series of addresses endorsing Virginia gubernatorial Democratic candidate Terry McAuliffe, using 300 black churches as her platform. Thus did she technically put

these churches in jeopardy of losing their tax-exempt status.

The vice president did not mince words. “I believe that my friend Terry McAuliffe is the leader Virginia needs at this moment.” After telling the congregations how to join his campaign, she said, “So please vote, Virginia. And elect Terry McAuliffe as your next governor.” It doesn’t get much more brazen than that.

Law professor Jonathan Turley also did not mince words. “If the White House participated in this plan to have direct politicking, they would have assisted in that violation. Now that puts them in a rather awkward position since their administration has to enforce this very rule.”

If Vice President Mike Pence had released videos to evangelical churches in the South last year urging voters to reelect Donald Trump, the Democrats would have gone crazy, no doubt launching another investigation, and the media would have been cheering them on from the get-go.

Though no one will say it, what Harris did was racist. Her choice of running the ads in black churches was exploitative—she knew she could get away with it—yet she cared not a whit if this triggered an IRS probe. She wasn’t going to get into trouble, and that is all that mattered to her.

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# CNN’S INANE STORY ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Halloween is a time when children dress up as monsters and witches. It’s also a time when some adults get dressed up, but, unlike the children, they actually think they’ve adopted

a new identity. To wit: CNN did a story about German Catholic women who dress up as priests and sincerely believe they've become members of the clergy.

As always, the wannabe priests are senior citizens. CNN described the protesters as "mostly gray-haired women." At a rally, they were "singing along—at full pelt." The protesting malcontents held signs, "Women, what are you waiting for?"

They are a rather motley crew. "Almost everyone is wearing a rainbow mask. One woman dressed as a clown sends a stream of giant bubbles into the air." This isn't a playground for pre-school kids—it's a demonstration conducted by adult women.

No matter, CNN takes them seriously. It says they want to "modernize" the German Catholic Church. Indeed, it says these "feminists [are] trying to save the Catholic Church." Save it or kill it?

CNN is badly informed. The data convincingly show that the more "modern" a religious body is, the more likely it is to wither and die. It is not the orthodox religious dioceses and orders of priests and nuns that are dying—it's the more "relevant" among them. Indeed, the German Catholic Church is in trouble precisely because it is the most "modern" Catholic entity in Europe, if not the world. Ditto for its Protestant brothers.

A majority of Germans identify as either Catholic (22.6 million) or Protestant (20.7 million). While only 10 percent of Catholics attend church on Sunday, the figure for Protestants is barely 3 percent. In 2019, 272,000 Catholics left the Church; the number of Protestants who fled was proportionately greater, 270,000. Similarly, a Pew survey on this issue, published in 2019, found that "Germany's share of Protestants has decreased at a faster rate than Catholics."

The same pattern is also found in the U.S. In fact, the divide between the orthodox and the heterodox is evident across

religions. It’s the mainline Protestant denominations that have witnessed the greatest decline, not the evangelical and fundamentalist communities. Orthodox Jews are growing; this is not true of Conservative and Reform Jews. In short, the more a major religion succumbs to the dominant culture, the more irrelevant it becomes to its flock.

It’s not hard to figure out. Why would a young Catholic girl, for instance, consider joining an order of nuns that is largely indistinguishable in dress, living arrangements and work from her friends who are married with a family? In other words, the more trendy a religion is, the less special it becomes.

CNN wrote this piece for one reason: it wants women priests. To that end, it wants to convince the public that the time has come for the Church to change. It could have done a similar story on the Mormons, the Orthodox churches, Orthodox Judaism, the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, Islam, and the Southern Baptist Convention—they all have an all-male clergy—but the big fish to fry is the Catholic Church.

This kind of media manipulation is not lost on most Americans. It explains why so many of them hold the profession of journalism in such low regard. They never seem to learn.

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# THE REAL ORIGINS OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Randall Balmer is a Dartmouth professor who maintains that the origins of the conservative evangelical-Catholic alliance, or what he prefers to call “the religious right,” are rooted in racism. A liberal evangelical himself, he has written about

this story many times, and recounts it again in his new book, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right.* But is he right?

Balmer is certainly right to say that abortion was not the real reason why conservative evangelicals and Catholics initially came together. When *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion in 1973, Catholics stood alone in opposing it. Unfortunately, this was at a time when Protestants, and Jews as well, reflexively took the opposite side on many moral issues that Catholics took.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that evangelicals pivoted and joined the fight for the unborn. Ever since, the two sides have worked together, owing much to the work of Chuck Colson and Father Richard John Neuhaus; both deceased, they cemented the evangelical-Catholic alliance.

Balmer recalls a meeting in November 1990 in Washington marking the ten-year anniversary of Ronald Reagan's election. He said he was surprised to be invited to this closed-door meeting given that it was populated by many influential conservative leaders. Also in attendance was Paul Weyrich, who co-founded the Heritage Foundation.

Weyrich observed that it was not abortion that initially drew the two religious strands together: the political movement began with a controversy involving Bob Jones University's racist strictures, including a ban on interracial dating.

To make his case, Balmer says that a federal court decision in 1971 affirming the right of the IRS to deny a tax-exempt status to racially discriminatory private schools was seized upon by Weyrich to forge a union between evangelicals and Catholics. He therefore argues that the alliance was anchored in racism.

To be sure, it was the racist policies of Bob Jones (which was also well known for its anti-Catholicism) that galvanized the

IRS. But it is a leap to conclude that it was racism that prompted Weyrich and his evangelical friends to join forces. A stronger case can be made that it was federal encroachment on religious schools that drove the movement, even if we allow that some evangelicals were racists. Indeed, it was federal overreach that *primarily* galvanized these two religious communities.

Balmer is correct to say that Weyrich had long been looking for an issue that would inspire a coalition, but he is unfair when he concludes that Weyrich and Jerry Falwell "sought to shift the grounds of the debate [away from racial segregation], framing their opposition in terms of religious freedom rather than in defense of racial segregation."

Weyrich and Falwell worked together not because they were segregationists, but because they wanted to mobilize the "moral majority." That term was coined by Weyrich, and it became a movement, ably led by Falwell. Their interest was cultural decay, not racial issues. Weyrich was always looking for a more macro subject, one that transcended the contentious moral issues of the day. Indeed, even Balmer acknowledges this verity.

Balmer quotes conservative activist Grover Norquist as saying, correctly, that the religious right did not start with prayer in the school or abortion. "It started in '77 or '78 with the Carter administration's attack on Christian schools and radio stations. That's where all the organization flowed out of. It was complete self-defense." He is correct again: it wasn't racism that propelled the alliance; rather, it was the federal attack on the autonomy of Christian schools.

In a similar vein, Balmer quotes Weyrich's very astute observation noting that when "the Internal Revenue Service tried to deny tax exemption to private schools, [that] more than any single act brought the fundamentalists and evangelicals into the political process." Again, there is no

mention of the race issue. It was never the predominant reason for mobilization.

Here’s more proof of Weyrich’s primary concern (again Balmer acknowledges in his book). “What caused the movement to surface was the federal government’s moves against Christian schools. This absolutely shattered the Christian community’s notions that Christians could isolate themselves inside their own institutions and teach what they pleased.”

Balmer also quotes what then presidential-candidate Ronald Reagan had to say about this matter. He told a big crowd of evangelicals in August 1980 that he stood with them in their fight against the “unconstitutional regulatory agenda” of the IRS “against independent schools.” Weyrich was at the event. “We gave him a ten-minute standing ovation. The whole movement was snowballing by then.” Their applause had nothing to do with celebrations of racism.

It should also be said that prominent conservatives opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act not because they were racists, but because of what they saw as an unconstitutional power grab by the federal government and a disrespect for states’ rights.

Why does any of this matter? It matters because it is unjust to maintain that the religious right was born of racism. No, it was born out of a genuine concern for the autonomy of Christian schools, and an animus against federal encroachment on them.