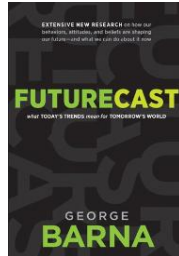


## America's Religious Beliefs and Practices Shift

### FUTURECAST

by George Barna



Published May 15, 2011

Tyndale House Publishing

The world and culture are changing at a pace beyond anything ever seen in history. But where will all these changes lead? What's in store for our government, economy, families and churches? Between the Internet and other news media, we're getting a lot of opinions, but the challenge is finding accurate facts that give us a real sense of what's happening – and what's likely to come.

In Futurecast, bestselling author and renowned researcher George Barna presents a timely look at the world we're creating every day and offers solid data to show the path our country is on and the emerging trends that will shape our world – and change each of our lives.

USA Today

September 12, 2011

If World War II-era warbler Kate Smith sang today, her anthem could be *God's Bless America*.

That's one of the key findings in newly released research that reveals America's drift from clearly defined religious denominations to faiths cut to fit personal preferences.

The folks who make up God as they go are side-by-side with self-proclaimed believers who claim the Christian label but shed their ties to traditional beliefs and practices. Religion statistics expert George Barna says, with a wry hint of exaggeration, America is headed for "310 million people with 310 million religions."

"We are a designer society. We want everything customized to our personal needs — our clothing, our food, our education," he says. Now it's our religion.

Barna's new book on U.S. Christians, *Futurecast*, tracks changes from 1991 to 2011, in annual national surveys of 1,000 to 1,600 U.S. adults. All the major trend lines of religious belief and behavior he measured ran downward — except two. More people claim they have accepted Jesus as their savior and expect to go to heaven. And more say they haven't been to church in the past six months except for special occasions such as weddings or funerals. In 1991, 24% were "unchurched." Today, it's 37%.

Barna blames pastors for those oddly contradictory findings. Everyone hears, "Jesus is the answer. Embrace him. Say this little *Sinners Prayer* and keep coming back. It doesn't work. People end up bored, burned out and empty," he says. "They look at church and wonder, 'Jesus died for *this*?'"

The consequence, Barna says, is that, for every subgroup of religion, race, gender, age and region of the country, the important markers of religious connection are fracturing. When he measures people by their belief in seven essential doctrines, defined by the National Association of Evangelicals [Statement of Faith](#), only 7% of those surveyed qualified.

Barna laments, "People say, I believe in God. I believe the Bible is a good book. And then I believe whatever I want." LifeWay Research reinforces those findings: A new survey of 900 U.S. Protestant pastors finds 62% predict the importance of being identified with a denomination will diminish over the next 10 years.

Exactly, says Carol Christoffel of Zion, Ill. She drifted through a few mainline Protestant denominations in her youth, found a home in the peace and unity message of the Baha'i tradition for several years, and then was drawn deeply into Native American traditional healing practices.

Yet, she also still calls herself Christian. "I'm a kind of bridge person between cultures. I agree with the teachings of Jesus and ... I know many Christians like me who keep the Bible's social teachings and who care for the earth and for each other," Christoffel says. "I support people who do good wherever they are." And it's not only Christians sampling hopscotch spirituality.

The Jewish magazine *Moment* has an "Ask the Rabbis" feature that consults 14 variations of Judaism "and there are many," says editor and publisher Nadine Epstein.

"The September edition of *Moment* asks "Can there be Judaism without God? And most say yes. It's incredibly exciting. We live in an era where you pick and choose the part of the religion that makes sense to you. And you can connect through culture and history in a meaningful way without necessarily religiously practicing," Epstein says.

Sociologist Robert Bellah first saw this phenomenon emerging in the 1980s. In a book he co-authored, *Habits of the Heart*, he introduces Sheila, a woman who represents this.

Sheila says: "I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.... It's just try to love yourself and be

gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other."

Bellah, now professor emeritus at University of California-Berkeley, says, "Sheila was a jolt to some at the time. But to a lot of people, it wasn't a jolt at all, they had been living that way for a while. Don't romanticize the past. Fervent religiosity was always in the minority. Just because people showed up in church didn't always mean a deep personal conviction or commitment."

Bellah sees two sides to the one-person-one-religion trend. On the positive: It's harder to hold on to prejudices against groups — by religion or race or gender or sexuality — if everyone wants to be seen individually.

"The bad news is you lose the capacity to make connections. Everyone is pretty much on their own," he says. And all this rampant individualism also fosters "hostility toward organized groups — government, industry, even organized religion."

Today, even the godless disagree on how not to believe, says Rusty Steil of Denver. He grew up Lutheran and retained his parents' "strong moral code," but, he says, he couldn't stick with "ancient myths of people trying to make sense of the world." "I don't find much comfort in imagining there's an all-powerful God who would allow people starving and all the natural and man-made disasters," Steil says.

Steil calls himself a "live-and-let-live atheist," as apart from the virulently anti-religious variety like Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, or "those who actively promote disbelief."

Paul Morris, an Army medic at Fort Bragg in North Carolina and veteran of six tours in the Middle East, says he's seen Christianity, Judaism and Islam in action, for better and for worse, and, frankly, he'll pass.

Morris grew up "old style Italian Catholic," but says he never felt like his spiritual questions were answered. So, he says, "I just wiped the slate clean. I studied every major religion on the face of the planet. Every one had parts that made sense but there was no one specific dogma or tenet I could really follow," Morris says.

"So now, I call myself an agnostic — one who just doesn't know. What I believe is that if you can just do the right thing, it works everywhere."

Copied from USA Today Online 9/12/11

The Study of Galatians – Lesson No.2 – September 25, 2011