

Leaving Religion Behind

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The Millennial Generation, those born between about 1981 and 2000 or so, receives a lot of press because they are a huge block of people—either the first or the second largest generation in America these days. It is changing the face of America. Studies have been made showing that they have transformed the workplace, education, culture, and even private things like dating, marriage, parenthood, and well, religious life.

About the last point, religion, a new study by the Pew Research Center finds that Millennials are now just as likely to say they have no religion or follow a non-Christian religion as they are to identify as Christian. Just less than half of Millennials (49%) describe themselves as Christians; whereas 40% are religious “nones” (that is, they have no religion), and 9% of them identify with non-Christian faiths. That is pretty much half and half. The 49% of Millennials who say they are Christians is the lowest percentage among all adult generations (Silent: 84%; Boomers: 76%; Gen X: 67%). Over the last ten years, Millennials have had the sharpest decline in Christian identity (down 16%).

The hope among Christians, at least, was that the Millennials would follow the traditional path and return to their religious roots as they got older and they began to accomplish various adult milestones like marriage, having children, buying a home, and advancing in their careers. Those tend to make you a little bit more conservative, a little more forward thinking about what you are going to teach your children and that sort of thing. Other generations have done the same. Just about every generation has had its rebels, and they have gone away from the church, but they have tended to come back.

But the evidence is mounting that, instead, Millennials are leaving religion for good. As the Millennials have aged, and they are starting to marry and have children and do all those things—buy homes and such—there is little evidence—in fact, negative evidence—to show that they are returning to church or organized religion in any way. Recent surveys have shown that Millennials are becoming less Christian, not more, as the age.

Why is that? A national survey by the American Enterprise Institute proffers a few reasons why Millennials may not ever return to the religious fold:

1. Many Millennials never had strong ties to Christianity in the first place, so they were less likely as children to develop habits or associations that would draw them into returning to church as adults.
2. Millennials are increasingly likely to marry a nonreligious spouse, reinforcing secularism.
3. Changing perspectives about the relationship between morality and religion have convinced many Millennials that religion is either irrelevant or even unnecessary in passing beliefs to their children.

Boomers and Gen X parents are partially to blame for this problem, because they started this trend by failing to raise their children within an organized religion. While only 5% of Baby Boomers were

raised without religion, more than three times as many Millennials (17%) had no religious upbringing whatsoever. Half of Boomers attended weekly church services when they were children, but only a third of Millennials did. You can see the decline—it is pretty precipitous.

On the other hand, Pew Research found in 2016 that children raised in households where both parents shared religious belief and practice still identified with that religion as adults. For instance, 84% of those raised by two Protestant parents claim Protestantism as adults. Ironically, the works the other way too: 64% of people raised by nonreligious parents are equally nonreligious as adults. So, what happens in those formative years is very important.

The second point I mentioned—that Millennials are increasingly likely to marry a nonreligious spouse—is perhaps the most worrying thing of all, because that sort of marriage cycle has the potential to snowball as the religious nones grow in numbers and influence. Among religiously unaffiliated Millennials, three-quarters of them have a nonreligious spouse.

Why are the few religious spouses—the remaining quarter—so ineffective in turn their unaffiliated spouses to Christianity? Why are they failing? The reason is that the perception among young adults is that religious people have a negative impact on society. They think religious people are part of the problem, and they don't want to become involved in being the problem—they want to be the solution. A 57% majority of Millennials believe that religious people are generally less tolerant of others. Many of them now look to sources outside religion for moral teaching, saying that religious organizations are not good role models for those teachings. That is quite a condemnation of America's churches.

Christians, sociologists and political scientists are concerned about this trend because it points to a widening gulf between secular and religious groups in the nation. This widening gulf will profoundly affect the internal divisions between the religious and the secular, the conservatives and the liberals, and the Republicans and the Democrats. We see that line coming down the middle of America, and it is getting wider and wider. That portends increased turmoil and conflicts, and some have raised the distant specter of civil war.

For us, among other things, it means that the downward trend toward societal breakdown and the end of the age continues apace. All evidence points to this trend continuing. It is not getting any better; it is actually getting worse. Not just among Millennials, but also among the next generation, Generation Z.