



7-1-2010

## What Americans Really Believe

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### Recommended Citation

Terry, Roger and Stark, Rodney (2010) "What Americans Really Believe," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 49 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol49/iss3/13>

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Rodney Stark. *What Americans Really Believe*.

Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008

Reviewed by Roger Terry

Forty years after Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock published the results of the first two major surveys of American religious beliefs and practices, Stark finally picked up where *American Piety* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968) left off. Now codirector of the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, Stark has published an analysis of data gathered in two Baylor Surveys of Religion—one in 2005, the other in 2007—as well as a 2006 survey focusing on economics and religion. The results are surprising in many regards. In fact, Stark delights in debunking popular misconceptions and myths about what Americans believe, hence the book's title. In the introduction, for instance, Stark highlights four areas where the “experts” are dead wrong: the end of denominationalism, declining attendance, losing our young people, and overall church membership. In short, denominationalism is alive and well, attendance at church is not declining, young people have always attended less frequently than their elders but increase their church-going when they marry and have children, and the percentage of Americans who belong to a local congregation has increased steadily since the colonies declared their independence—from 17 percent in 1776 to 34 percent in 1850 to 51 percent in 1906 to 59 percent in 1952 to 69 percent in 2005.

*What Americans Really Believe* is an easy but information-packed read. It is divided into twenty-three short chapters, each dealing with a distinct topic and featuring multiple tables that present summarized data from the surveys. The Baylor questions were much more detailed and more thoughtfully constructed than those included in previous surveys and therefore yield a more complete picture of the religious beliefs and practices of the American populace than has previously been available. In this review, I will discuss five of the chapters to present a sample of what the book contains. I will then make a few observations about the book in general and its relevance to LDS readers.

Chapter 2, “Church Growth,” begins with the statement, “Early in 2008, when the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported that 44 percent of American adults have switched from one denomination to another, many observers seemed to think this observation was a bit scandalous.” The *Wall Street Journal* even surmised that people were changing denominations to avoid certain moral obligations or doctrinal demands. “If that were true,” writes Stark, “then the more permissive ‘liberal’ denominations would be gaining and the more demanding ‘conservative’ denominations would be shrinking” (21). Statistics show, however, that the exact opposite is taking place. Americans are deserting the liberal denominations in droves and are flocking instead to the demanding conservative faiths. In fact, all liberal Protestant denominations decreased in membership from 1960 to 2000, while all conservative Protestant faiths gained members. Roman Catholic membership decreased by 5 percent during this period, and LDS membership increased by 122 percent. Some Latter-day Saints will undoubtedly be disappointed to learn that, contrary to faith-promoting rumor, the LDS Church is not the fastest-growing denomination in the United States. Four churches, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses, grew faster than the Mormons. The Church of God in Christ topped the list with an astounding 786 percent increase. It should be noted that these membership numbers come not from the Baylor surveys but from statistics gathered by the *Yearbook of American Churches* (1962) and *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (2001). Also, instead of using simple membership totals, Stark lists the number of members per 1,000 U.S. population in order to account for population growth.

Chapter 8 deals with the fascinating question of who thinks they are going to heaven. A 1957 Gallup poll found that “74 percent of Americans said they believed in life after death” and “another 13 percent said they were undecided.” The 1964 poll from which Stark and Glock drew their analysis for *American Piety* revealed that 47 percent of Americans were “absolutely sure” about life after death and 32 percent were “pretty sure.” Starting in 1973, the General Social Surveys often asked this same question. Consistently, about 70 percent of Americans responded affirmatively, with 8 or 9 percent undecided. Significantly, the 2005 Baylor survey shifted the focus of the question from life after death to belief in heaven, resulting in 67 percent who answered that they were “absolutely sure” heaven exists, and another 17 percent who thought it “probably” does (69–70). The 2007 survey yielded similar totals. The responses varied, predictably, according to religious affiliation. Among conservative Protestants, 89 percent were absolutely sure, compared to only 60 percent of liberal Protestants and 62 percent of Roman Catholics. Interestingly, of the Jews surveyed,

zero percent were absolutely sure heaven exists, while 23 percent were pretty sure. As with many of the survey results, other factors influenced belief in heaven. For instance, 68 percent of women believe in heaven while only 56 percent of men report being absolutely sure, African Americans (86 percent) are more certain about heaven than are whites (60 percent), and Republicans (77 percent) are more believing than Democrats (54 percent). Age has no effect, but education does—70 percent of those who did not go to college are absolutely sure, compared with 43 percent of those who have attended graduate school.

The 2007 Baylor survey asked additional questions, attempting to reveal a more detailed picture of the American religious landscape. One of the questions, “How certain are you that you will get to heaven?” yielded the following breakdown: 30 percent were very certain, 16 percent quite certain, 20 percent somewhat certain, 4 percent not very certain, 3 percent not at all certain, 16 percent didn’t know, and 11 percent didn’t believe in heaven. In total, then, 66 percent of Americans are at least somewhat certain that they will go to heaven. Apparently, we are still a fairly optimistic society about either our own worthiness or God’s leniency.

Chapter 10 explores the notion of evil and reconciling its existence with the idea of an omnipotent and loving God. Previous research offered limited information on societal perceptions of evil. The 2005 Baylor survey showed that about 58 percent of Americans believe in the existence of Satan and 48 percent believe in demons. The 2007 survey probed for further information. Respondents were asked to identify what they felt were the primary sources of evil in the world. Only 43 percent agreed with the statement that most evil in the world is caused by the devil, while 89 percent agreed that most evil is caused by mankind. (Among conservative Protestants, however, 73 percent blamed the devil and 84 percent blamed mankind.) Obviously, these were not mutually exclusive categories and, apparently, many people blame both the devil and human nature. But only 25 percent of respondents agreed that human nature is basically evil. How people view the source of evil affects their stance on certain moral questions. For instance, among those who agree that most evil is caused by the devil, only 18 percent believe the government should abolish the death penalty and 81 percent believe in harsher punishment for criminals, while among those who disagree that the devil causes most evil, the percentages were, respectively, 30 and 59. These last statistics appear counterintuitive on the surface or perhaps point to a bit of irrational reasoning among the American populace. It would seem that those who blame the devil for most of the evil in the world would be more merciful toward those who commit serious crime. But we must look at these numbers in tandem with the

figures shown above—namely, that conservative Protestants blame both the devil and the individual for evil. This being the case, these respondents are inclined to favor harsh punishment for crime, even though they place part of the blame on the devil.

Chapter 14 is titled “Atheism: The Godless Revolution That Never Happened.” Intellectuals have been prophesying the demise of religion for centuries, but the Baylor surveys and other studies show that belief in deity is alive and well, not only in America, but also in almost every other nation. The 2001–2 World Values Surveys, for instance, show that the percentage of the population who confess to being “convinced” atheists is surprisingly consistent throughout the world. In most nations, the percentage of convinced atheists is below 8 percent, with most nations ringing in at 3 to 5 percent. Even in countries that belonged to the former Soviet Union, where atheism was taught in the schools and faith was actively discriminated against, the prevalence of atheists ranges from 1 percent in Poland and Romania to 8 percent in the Czech Republic. Russia is at 4 percent, exactly the same as the United States. Interestingly, the only country that rivals China’s 14 percent atheism is France. Japan, at 12 percent, is the only other country included in the survey with more than 10 percent atheism.

What does this say about the human race being “hardwired” for belief in deity? Quite a bit, actually. “One reason the percentage of atheists has not grown during the past sixty years,” writes Stark, “is that irreligion is not effectively transmitted from parents to children. Studies show that the majority of children born into an irreligious home end up joining a religious group—most often a conservative denomination” (117). Stark also addresses the recent slate of books by such high-profile atheists as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens and their apparent lack of success in converting people to their belief system. “Because these books sold well, it was widely assumed that they signaled a breakthrough for atheism—that large numbers of Americans were now ready to stand up and admit they didn’t believe in God” (116), but such, apparently, is not the case. “So,” asks Stark, “why have books by angry atheists been selling well? For one thing, 4 percent of . . . 300 million Americans amounts to more than 12 million people—a lot of them potential book buyers. For another thing, this 4 percent is greatly overrepresented in the media, especially among book reviewers, and so the books received maximum coverage” (121). Some reviewers, however—even some who themselves are atheists—have been critical of these books. For instance, biologist H. Allen Orr, writing for the *New York Review of Books*, admitted to once calling Richard Dawkins “a professional atheist.” But after reading *The God Delusion*, Orr was forced to conclude that “he’s actually more of an amateur” (121).

Perhaps Michael Novak offered the best explanation for the ineffectiveness of these books, observing that “there is an odd defensiveness about [them]—as though they were a sign not of victory but of desperation” (121).

Chapter 18, titled “Faith and Politics: Is There a Secret Plot of Evangelicals to Take Over the American Government?” is the one problematic chapter in the book. To this point, Stark has maintained a more-or-less objective and evenhanded tone, but in this chapter, for some reason, he assumes a defensive posture, and his interpretation of the data is questionable at best. This defensive tone is difficult to explain, considering Stark’s own professed religious beliefs. In a 2004 interview, he stated that although he is not an atheist, “I don’t know what I believe. I was brought up a Lutheran in Jamestown, North Dakota. I have trouble with faith. I’m not proud of this. I don’t think it makes me an intellectual. I would believe if I could, and I may be able to before it’s over. I would welcome that.”<sup>1</sup> Since that interview, Stark has apparently experienced the change of heart he hoped for. In a 2007 interview, he made this statement about his personal beliefs:

I was never an atheist, but I probably could have been best described as an agnostic. As I continued to write about religion and continued to devote more attention [to] Christian history, I found one day several years ago that I was a Christian. Consequently, I was willing to accept an appointment at Baylor University, the world’s largest Baptist university. They do not require faculty member[s] to be Baptists (many are Catholic) and I am not one. I suppose ‘independent Christian’ is the best description of my current position.<sup>2</sup>

Since it doesn’t make sense for an “independent Christian” to wax defensive over questions of Evangelical motives, perhaps the incompatible tenor and slant evident in only this chapter have something to do with Stark’s employment at Baylor. Or, more likely, since the book was published by Baylor University Press, perhaps this chapter reflects an institutional editorial bias.

The subtitle of the chapter is the first indication of this shift in tone. Because the chapter revolves around one particular Christian group, it seems largely out of place among the other chapters, all of which focus on American religious beliefs in general. The chapter begins with this statement: “Evangelical Christians are the new scapegoats of liberal American culture.” Then, after citing a study showing that 53 percent of college professors have negative feelings toward Evangelicals, Stark makes this emotional claim: “These findings are entirely consistent with a deluge of hysterical warnings against an impending theocracy and other calamities if something isn’t done soon to curb these religious fanatics” (149). After

citing three books with anti-Evangelical messages and referring vaguely to a whole “new literary genre” of similar books, Stark marvels, “Given how often these issues are included in opinion polls, it is amazing that little or no data have been offered to support claims about the ideological chasms separating Evangelicals from everyone else. This chapter is intended to make up for that deficiency” (150). But Stark’s interpretation of the survey data is puzzling at best.

In a section subtitled “Identifying Evangelicals,” Stark conveniently refuses to even offer a definition of what an Evangelical is. He mentions that Baptists, Nazarenes, Pentecostals, and members of other conservative denominations are often classified as such, while members of liberal Protestant churches and Roman Catholics are not. The problem with this, he says, is that many of the conservative Christians do not self-identify as Evangelicals, but many members of liberal denominations and even some Catholics do. His solution is to define an Evangelical as anyone who claims to be an Evangelical, regardless of theological doctrine or denominational membership. If only Evangelicals were so generous in their classifying of others as either Christian or non-Christian.

The problem with this chapter is that Stark begins with a stated purpose—to show that Evangelicals are not so different from mainstream Americans—and when the numbers do not quite support his thesis, he must explain away significant statistical differences in the survey results. For instance, the Baylor survey showed that 94 percent of Evangelicals support prayer in school, while only 67 percent of liberal Protestants and 60 percent of all non-Evangelicals do. “What seems evident,” he writes condescendingly, “is that substantial numbers of non-Evangelicals don’t really know what strict separation of church and state means these days—it is to them nothing but a slogan. . . . In contrast, Evangelicals seem more aware of what is implied by the strict separation of church and state and therefore reject it” (153). In other words, ignorance explains the difference, not that Evangelicals actually do have very different views from other Americans.

Other significant differences in the survey results are similarly dismissed. For instance, even though 94 percent of Evangelicals oppose abortion, compared with 60 percent of liberal Protestants and 63 percent of all non-Evangelicals, “we see that Evangelicals aren’t that different in comparison with other Americans, as opposed to comparison with the positions much favored by the media” (157). The survey results show similar differences in attitudes regarding same-sex attraction. In this chapter, a 30 percent difference is simply dismissed, while in earlier chapters an 8 to 10 percent difference in survey results is statistically significant.

A particularly apt aphorism for this chapter is “torture numbers and they’ll confess to anything.” After waterboarding the data for several pages, Stark finally returns to his subtitle, expressing hope that “spurious claims about evangelical theocratic plots will . . . soon seem . . . ridiculous. For the fact is that Evangelicals are not so very different after all” (158).

But Mormons are. And so are Jews. This is one area in which the surveys definitely speak for themselves. Throughout the book, respondents are divided into categories such as liberal Protestant, conservative Protestant, and Roman Catholic, and in several chapters Latter-day Saint and Jewish respondents are also specifically identified. And these two generally represent extremes in the data set. For instance, 85 percent of LDS respondents claimed to attend church weekly, which would certainly please and likely surprise the statisticians at Church headquarters. The next highest attenders are members of the Assemblies of God, at 61 percent. By contrast, only 13 percent of Jewish respondents attend church weekly. The only group with lower attendance than the Jews were the Unitarians, at 7 percent. Similarly, when measuring “tension” between a denomination and the surrounding culture, as measured by attitudes toward pornography, abortion, homosexual behavior, premarital sex, cohabitation, gambling, and wearing revealing clothing, the Mormons come in far ahead of most other denominations, with 94 percent reporting “high tension.” Assemblies of God, again, were second, at 81 percent. Surprisingly, only 49 percent of Baptists identified high tension between their religion and the surrounding culture. And Jewish respondents rang in at zero percent, with 83 percent reporting “low tension.”

One exception to this general trend of Mormons representing one extreme in the data set comes from questions regarding religious and mystical experiences. Six questions probed into this aspect of religion, which asked if respondents had heard the voice of God speaking to them, had felt called by God to do something, had been protected by a guardian angel, had either witnessed or received a miraculous healing, or had spoken or prayed in tongues. While 86 percent of Latter-day Saints answered yes to at least two of the six questions, only 53 percent answered yes to at least three. By contrast, 81 percent of Assemblies of God members answered yes to three or more of the questions, as did 70 percent of Pentecostal respondents. On the other extreme, 7 percent of Jewish and zero percent of the Unitarian respondents claimed to have had three or more of these experiences.

Overall, the Baylor Surveys of Religion reveal a fascinating picture of American beliefs, and Stark admits that his slender book barely scratches the surface in analyzing the information. Fortunately, the Institute for Studies of Religion has planned to conduct similar surveys every two years through 2018. We can hope that these surveys and the resulting analysis will increase our understanding of what Americans believe and how their beliefs are changing over time.

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1. "A Double Take on Early Christianity: An Interview with Rodney Stark," *The National Institute for the Renewal of the Priesthood*, <http://www.jknirp.com/stark.htm> (accessed May 18, 2010).

2. Massimo Introvigne, "A Christmas Conversation with Rodney Stark," *CESNUR*, [http://www.cesnur.org/2007/mi\\_stark.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2007/mi_stark.htm) (accessed May 18, 2010).