

Cultural Research Center



American Worldview Inventory 2021

Release #3: The Seismic Generational Shift in Worldview: Millennials Seek a Nation Without God, Bible and Churches

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It is not uncommon to find substantial differences in lifestyle choices across generations. Worldview preferences are no different.

The *American Worldview Inventory 2021*, the annual survey of the philosophy of life held by American adults, conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, did find some worldview similarities across generations. Specifically:

- The dominant worldview of all four adult generations in the United States is Syncretism—the mash-up of various worldviews that provides each individual with a customized understanding of, and response to life. In total, 88% of Americans have Syncretism, rather than a substantively coherent and recognizable worldview such as postmodernism or secular humanism, as their dominant worldview. A large majority of each generation relies on a syncretistic worldview when making their life choices. Overall, 89% of Millennials, 86% of Gen Xers, 83% of Boomers, and 86% of Builders have a syncretistic worldview (see CRC's report on Syncretism [here](#)).
- None of the four generations had at least one out of 10 of its members for whom any of the seven worldviews was dominant.
- A majority of Americans, regardless of their generation, consider themselves to be Christian, ranging from a low of 57% of Millennials to a high of 83% among Builders.
- CRC's assessment measures worldview within eight categories of beliefs and behavior. The new research revealed that across all four generations the category in which Americans are least likely to think and act biblically is the dimension of "Bible, Truth, and Morals." Further, all four generations were found to be most likely to believe and behave biblically in relation to religious faith practices.
- There were more than a dozen specific biblical beliefs accepted by only a minority of members of each generation.

The differences across generations paint a more alarming picture of how the Christian faith and biblical principles are perceived and embraced in our nation.

The Millennial Spiritual Revolution

There are more than two dozen examples of Millennials being substantially more likely than any other generation to reject biblical principles in favor of more worldly spiritual perspectives and practices.

Millennials, defined in the CRC research as people born between 1985 and 2002 (i.e., aged 18 to 36 at the time of the survey), are **far more likely** than any other generation to:

- Define success in life as happiness, personal freedom, or productivity without oppression
- Consider an abortion performed to reduce personal economic or emotional discomfort to be morally acceptable
- Consider premarital sex with someone expected to be their future spouse to be morally acceptable
- Deem reincarnation a real possibility
- Be liberal regarding fiscal and social policies
- Champion liberal theology

- Be among the “Don’ts”—people who either do not know if God exists, do not believe that He exists, or do not care if He exists

Millennials were also **much less likely** than Americans from older generations to hold numerous positions, such as:

- Being deeply committed to practicing their religious faith
- Believing that the universe was designed, created, and is maintained by God
- Believing that human beings were created by God, in His image, but are undermined by personal sin and therefore need to be redeemed through Jesus Christ
- Accepting the idea of “original sin”
- Agreeing that the universal purpose of humanity is to know, love and serve God with all of our heart, mind, strength and soul
- Embracing the Bible as their primary source of moral guidance
- Believing that every moral choice we make either honors or dishonors God
- Accepting the notion of God being the all-knowing, all-powerful and just creator of the universe who still rules that universe today
- Considering Satan to be a real and influential being
- Participating in religious activities such as worshipping God; praying to God; studying the Bible; seeking and following God’s will; and asking for God’s forgiveness for their sins
- Identifying as a Christian
- Believing that after they die they will spend eternity in God’s presence solely because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior

The *AWVI 2021* points out that a comparison of generational responses to traditional measures of faith underscores the new approach to faith and morality practiced by Millennials, in particular. For example, while four out of 10 people 55 or older (40%) can be classified as born-again Christians based on their beliefs about personal salvation, far fewer Gen X adults (26%) fall in the segment, but just one out of every six Millennials (16%) meets the criterion.

In contrast, while slightly more than one out of four Boomers and Builders (28%) qualify as “Don’ts”—that is, people who do not know, believe, or care if God exists—and roughly the same proportion of Gen X adults can be characterized as such (31%), closer to half of all Millennials (43%) are Don’ts.

Joining the Gen X Spiritual Repositioning

Those spiritual transitions represent a continuation of dramatic changes introduced by Gen X prior to the arrival of the Millennials. George Barna, the veteran sociologist who has been studying national religious patterns for more than four decades, pointed out that the reshaping of America’s religious landscape began nearly 60 years ago. Baby Boomers were the most aggressive initiators of spiritual change, he noted, embracing dramatically different beliefs and behaviors than their predecessors. Their successors, Gen X, realigned the nation’s religious boundaries even further. The youngest adult generation of today, Millennials, are now threatening to reshape the nation’s religious parameters beyond recognition.

Together, Gen Xers and Millennials (i.e., two generations currently in their late teens through mid-50s) emerged with many beliefs that stand in sharp contrast to those held by Boomers and Builders (the two generations in their mid-50s and older). The younger pair of generations is substantially more likely than their elders to believe the following:

- Horoscopes provide useful guidance for their life
- Getting even with those who offend or harm them is defensible
- God is not involved in people’s lives
- Allowing people to own property facilitates economic injustice
- Karma is a viable life principle

- The Bible is ambiguous in what it teaches about abortion
- Human beings have developed over a long period of time from less advanced life forms to our current condition
- The Bible is not the accurate and reliable (i.e., inerrant) word of God

In fact, the two younger adult generations are considerably more likely than older generations to rely primarily on Moralistic Therapeutic Deism for worldview guidance. (see CRC’s recent report on Moralistic Therapeutic Deism [here](#)). They are also significantly more likely than people from older generations to argue that traditional moral perspectives are irrelevant today, making a series of formerly rejected behaviors now considered to be morally acceptable. Those included lying, not repaying loans, taking illegal tax deductions, speeding, and committing suicide or allowing for euthanasia.

The two younger generations are also much less likely than their older counterparts to accept the Golden Rule, to believe that wealth is provided by God for its possessors to manage for His purposes, or to believe that the universe was created without any divine intervention in that process.

| Generational Transitions in Significant Beliefs and Behaviors | | | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| Belief or Behavior | Mill | GenX | Boom | Builder |
| Willing to try anything at least once | 66% | 57% | 31% | 28% |
| Believe in karma | 64 | 61 | 52 | 30 |
| Humans developed over time from less advanced forms | 54 | 53 | 40 | 34 |
| Reincarnation is a very real possibility | 51 | 39 | 29 | 20 |
| Personally receive guidance from your horoscope | 35 | 32 | 10 | 3 |
| Individual ownership of property facilitates economic injustice | 35 | 34 | 13 | 16 |
| You try to get even with people who have wronged you | 38 | 33 | 12 | 10 |
| Universal purpose for all people is to know, love, and serve God with all heart, mind, strength and soul | 19 | 30 | 42 | 50 |
| Universe was designed and created, and is sustained by God | 30 | 47 | 62 | 67 |
| God is the all-knowing, all powerful, just creator of the universe, He still rules it today | 31 | 47 | 57 | 64 |
| Human beings were created by God in His image but are Fallen creatures in need of redemption by Jesus Christ | 40 | 57 | 65 | 60 |
| Satan is a real, influential being | 44 | 58 | 64 | 55 |
| Deeply committed to practicing my faith | 45 | 57 | 64 | 72 |
| You treat others as you want them to treat you | 48 | 53 | 81 | 90 |

Note: Due to space limitations the descriptions above are not the exact wording used in the survey.
 Generation abbreviations and definitions: Mill = Millennials – born 1984-2002; Gen X = Generation X – born 1965-1983; Boom = Baby Boomers – born 1946-1964; Builders – born 1927-1945.
 Source: *American Worldview Inventory 2021*, Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; conducted February 2021, N=2,000 adults 18+.

These Choices Have Serious Consequences

The results of the generational worldview analysis produce a stunning portrait of the world through the eyes of each generation. Millennials have clearly gone farther than any recent generation in cutting ties with traditional Christian views and normative biblical teaching.

| Generational Differences in Spirituality | | | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| Spiritual Indicator | Mill | GenX | Boom | Builder |
| Consider yourself to be a Christian | 57% | 70% | 79% | 83% |
| Praise, thank or worship God each week | 45 | 66 | 70 | 72 |
| Don't know, care, or believe that God exists | 43 | 31 | 28 | 27 |
| Believe that when they die they will go to Heaven but only because they confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior | 16 | 26 | 41 | 39 |
| Possess a biblical worldview | 4 | 6 | 8 | 9 |
| Most influential worldview*: | | | | |
| Moralistic Therapeutic Deism | 44 | 38 | 32 | 29 |
| Biblical Theism | 9 | 22 | 42 | 47 |
| Postmodernism | 18 | 13 | 14 | 17 |
| Secular Humanism | 15 | 11 | 14 | 19 |
| Eastern Mysticism | 12 | 7 | 9 | 6 |
| Nihilism | 11 | 8 | 8 | 13 |
| Marxism | 10 | 9 | 9 | 14 |

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Generation abbreviations and definitions: Mill = Millennials – born 1984-2002; Gen X = Generation X – born 1965-1983; Boom = Baby Boomers – born 1946-1964; Builders – born 1927-1945.

* indicates percentage of adults for whom these worldviews are not held as a dominant worldview but do have a strong or moderate influence on respondents' beliefs and behaviors

Source: *American Worldview Inventory 2021*, Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University; conducted February 2021, N=2,000 adults 18+.

Asked to describe the kind of world that Millennials are seeking, Barna outlined seven components to the Millennials' outlook:

1. Government should continue to expand in reach, authority, power, and spending, in order to facilitate a more desirable way of living.
2. Public policies and programs should be more flexible and fluid. But the syncretistic worldview they possess means that American culture would also be less predictable and consistent than in the past, owing to the inherently contradictory worldview positions adopted by Americans.
3. More episodes of violence and combativeness across the nation, attributable to the self-righteousness and sense of personal sovereignty maintained by emergent adults, combined with their dismissal of the legitimacy of institutional authority, causing them to be unwilling to compromise and to feel that not getting their way is a personal threat or challenge.
4. Political tensions will remain significant in the short-term due to the divergent views of core perspectives related to national vision, disdain for compromise, national moral recalibrations, and the revision of U.S. history.
5. A redefined Christian community that will be smaller in numbers, less influential, and less economically robust. That will include changes such as fewer people and less money being designated to global Christian missions, and existing privileges received by churches, such as tax exemptions and land-use exceptions, being withdrawn.
6. Interpersonal relationships will be more difficult to sustain due to declining levels of trust, diminished willingness to compromise, heightened reliance of technology for communication, and disappointments produced by the lack of moral consensus.
7. Reshaped family units given fewer formal marriages, increased levels of divorce and separation, liberalized sexual morality, and the reduced appeal of raising children.

A Challenging Time for the Christian Church

This is the 30th anniversary of the publication of Barna's breakthrough bestseller, *The Frog in the Kettle* (1990). The author of more than 50 books since then regarding faith and culture, Barna pointed out that the American Church has been like that frog in boiling water for the last three decades—and the frog is barely surviving.

"Gen X and the Millennials have solidified dramatic changes in the nation's central beliefs and lifestyles," Barna noted. "From a nationwide perspective, the Christian Church has done shockingly little to push back. The result is a culture in which core institutions—including churches—and basic ways of life are continually being radically redefined."

Asked to give examples of such change, he expanded his comments. "The family unit and traditional family practices have been reshaped, with some long-term, fundamental family ideals and practices outlawed. The responsibilities of government have been significantly broadened and transformed. The influence of the Christian church has diminished while the influence of arts, entertainment, and news media has exploded. As millions of parents discovered during the pandemic, public schools have become indoctrination farms rather than places for teaching basic life skills."

Barna lamented the direction that the youngest adult generations in the United States have embraced. "Millennials are leading the way toward the new worldview emphases in America," he stated. "The research reveals that their rhetoric is often inconsistent with their behavior. Because people do what they believe, if behavior does not coincide with stated beliefs we know that people do not truly hold those beliefs.

"For example", the Arizona Christian University professor continued, "Millennials champion the concept of tolerating different points of view. Yet we see in the research that their behaviors—such as promoting getting even, situational treatment of other people, or censoring specific viewpoints or policies—conflicts with their alleged embrace of tolerance and diversity. In fact, Millennials are twice as likely as older adults to specify that the people they respect are those who hold the same religious and political views as they do. The attitudinal and behavioral evidence related to a variety of beliefs and related behaviors suggests that they are not a tolerant generation despite their self-image and public promotion as such.

"More importantly," Barna continued, "the Millennial generation in particular, seems committed to living without God, without the Bible, and without Christian churches as foundations in either their personal life or within American society. In the Sixties and Seventies, Baby Boomers opened the floodgates of questioning cultural foundations. Baby Busters, or Gen X, continued that cultural transition, though less emphatically. Millennials are emulating the aggressiveness of the Boomers in their determination to reshape culture according to their preferences.

"It is hard to imagine a louder, clearer, and more direct challenge to the future of the Christian faith in the United States," Barna concluded. "If Christian churches, pastors, schools, and individuals believe that a biblical Christian faith is important—not just for themselves but also for our nation and the world beyond it—time is running out to aggressively and strategically act on that belief, before those who so vehemently disagree succeed in destroying the freedom and opportunity to preserve the ways of God."

About the Research

The *American Worldview Inventory 2021 (AWVI)* is an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over). Begun as an annual tracking study in 2020, the assessment is based on several dozen worldview-related questions drawn from eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

AWVI 2021 is the first-ever national survey of biblical and competing worldviews. It was undertaken in February 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of indeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity.

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school's campus in Glendale, Arizona, in the Phoenix metropolitan area. In addition to conducting the annual *American Worldview Inventory*, CRC also introduced the *ACU Student Worldview Inventory (SWVI)* in 2020. That survey is administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, and a final administration among students just prior to their graduation. The *ACU SWVI* enables the University to track the worldview development of its student body and to make changes to that process as recommended by the research.

The Cultural Research Center also conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to transforming American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith, as described in the Bible, but remains inter-denominational and non-partisan. Access to past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is available at www.culturalresearchcenter.com. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.arizonachristian.edu.