

Reflections on the Barna Report on Spirituality: “American Spirituality Gives Way to Simplicity and the Desire to Make a Difference”

by Bob Young
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Despite what may appear to be indications to the contrary, the U.S. population generally continues to describe itself as deeply spiritual. Thus concludes a new study from the Barna Group (“American Spirituality Gives Way to Simplicity and the Desire to Make a Difference”, released Oct. 27) which shows also that as Americans rethink lifestyles and priorities, they describe themselves as socially conscious and living "simple" lives. These concepts are used to define spirituality more often than common "spiritual" labels. Is there something in the American psyche that relates to spirituality but is “beyond spirituality”?

Report Summary and Highlights

Most Americans describe their religious faith as personally very important (71%); 64% of the nation's adults think of themselves as "deeply spiritual"; 82% of adults describe themselves as "spiritually mature." The report adds, “In addition to spiritual identities--and in some ways beyond spiritual labels--Americans also think of themselves as difference-makers and concerned about the world around them. Three out of four adults say they are ‘making a positive difference in the world’ (78%); 86% describe themselves as ‘caring deeply about social injustice’ and ‘concerned about the moral condition of the country’.” Despite these positive self-perceptions, most Americans seek greater clarity about their life's purpose, portraying a personal search that is challenging and often conflicted. At times Americans put a positive face on their reason for being; other times they admit to not living up to their ideals. Most Americans also acknowledge they need to make major life changes.

The report asks, “How does the Christian community compare on these self-perceptions?” Answer: In many ways, the self-perceptions of Christians are remarkably similar to those of others. The largest gaps show up in spiritual self-perceptions. Christians are much more likely to describe themselves as deeply spiritual, to desire a close relationship with God, and to prioritize their faith. Yet, on social awareness, matters of lifestyle, and the desire for simplicity, the self-identities of Christians and others are similar.

Reflections

Previous Barna Group reports have observed contemporary tendencies to redefine Christianity. It appears that a redefinition of spirituality is also occurring in our society. In this new definition, being “spiritual” involves concepts like simplicity, personal calling, social justice, and making a difference. These reflect a desire to communicate and engage today's culture. This version of spirituality often exists independent of God, a humanism come full circle so that humans become their own gods. The church faces a continuing struggle in its efforts to communicate biblical spirituality which focuses on God in the current cultural context.

The report also surfaces again the continuing challenge for Christians to live “in the world but not of the world.” Too often, the social concerns, lifestyles, and priorities of Christians are little different than those of their non-Christian friends and neighbors.

David Kinnaman, who directed the study, concludes: “Christian leaders who hope to have an influence within this fragmenting culture will have to find and communicate common values but also be cautious not to pursue mainstream credibility at the cost of simplistic or spiritually impotent solutions.”

You can read the entire report at www.barna.org