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MOST RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN USA HAVE LOST GROUND, SURVEY FINDS WHEN IT COMES TO RELIGION, THE USA IS NOW LAND OF THE FREELANCERS.

THE PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WHO CALL THEMSELVES, IN SOME WAY CHRISTIAN, HAS DROPPED MORE THAN 11% IN A GENERATION. THE FAITHFUL HAVE SCATTERED OUT OF THEIR TRADITIONAL BASES: THE BIBLE BELT IS LESS BAPTIST. THE RUST BELT IS LESS CATHOLIC. AND EVERYWHERE, MORE PEOPLE ARE EXPLORING SPIRITUAL FRONTIERS — OR FALLING OFF THE FAITH MAP COMPLETELY.

THESE DRAMATIC SHIFTS IN JUST 18 YEARS ARE DETAILED IN THE NEW AMERICAN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION SURVEY (ARIS), TO BE RELEASED TODAY. IT FINDS THAT, DESPITE GROWTH AND IMMIGRATION THAT HAS ADDED NEARLY 50 MILLION ADULTS TO THE U.S. POPULATION, ALMOST ALL RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS HAVE LOST GROUND SINCE THE FIRST ARIS SURVEY IN 1990.

"MORE THAN EVER BEFORE, PEOPLE ARE JUST MAKING UP THEIR OWN STORIES OF WHO THEY ARE. THEY SAY, 'I'M EVERYTHING. I'M NOTHING. I BELIEVE IN MYSELF,' " SAYS BARRY KOSMIN, SURVEY CO-AUTHOR.

AMONG THE KEY FINDINGS IN THE 2008 SURVEY:

• SO MANY AMERICANS CLAIM NO RELIGION AT ALL (15%, UP FROM 8% IN 1990), THAT THIS CATEGORY NOW OUTRANKS EVERY OTHER MAJOR U.S. RELIGIOUS GROUP EXCEPT CATHOLICS AND BAPTISTS. IN A NATION THAT HAS LONG BEEN MOSTLY CHRISTIAN, "THE CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANITY … DOES NOT COME FROM OTHER RELIGIONS BUT FROM A REJECTION OF ALL FORMS OF ORGANIZED RELIGION," THE REPORT CONCLUDES.

• CATHOLIC STRONGHOLDS IN NEW ENGLAND AND THE MIDWEST HAVE FADED AS IMMIGRANTS, RETIREES AND YOUNG JOB-SEEKERS HAVE MOVED TO THE SUN BELT. WHILE BISHOPS FROM THE MIDWEST TO MASSACHUSETTS CLOSE DOWN OR CONSOLIDATE HISTORIC PARISHES, THOSE IN THE SOUTH ARE SCRAMBLING TO SERVE INCREASING NUMBERS OF WORSHIPERS.

• BAPTISTS, 15.8% OF THOSE SURVEYED, ARE DOWN FROM 19.3% IN 1990. MAINLINE PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS, ONCE SOCIALLY DOMINANT, HAVE SEEN SHARP DECLINES: THE PERCENTAGE OF METHODISTS, FOR EXAMPLE, DROPPED FROM 8% TO 5%.

• THE PERCENTAGE OF THOSE WHO CHOOSE A GENERIC LABEL, CALLING THEMSELVES SIMPLY CHRISTIAN, PROTESTANT, NON-DENOMINATIONAL, EVANGELICAL OR "BORN AGAIN," WAS 14.2%, ABOUT THE SAME AS IN 1990.

• JEWISH NUMBERS SHOWED A STEADY DECLINE, FROM 1.8% IN 1990 TO 1.2% TODAY. THE PERCENTAGE OF MUSLIMS, WHILE STILL SLIM, HAS DOUBLED, FROM 0.3% TO 0.6%. ANALYSTS WITHIN BOTH GROUPS SUGGEST THOSE NUMBERS UNDERSTATE THE GROUPS' POPULATIONS.

IHSAN BAGBY, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ISLAMIC STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY-LEXINGTON, SAYS THAT MOST NATIONAL TELEPHONE SURVEYS SUCH AS ARIS UNDERCOUNT MUSLIMS, AND THAT HE IS CONDUCTING A STUDY OF MOSQUES' MEMBERSHIP SPONSORED BY THE HARTFORD (CONN.) INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS RESEARCH.

MEANWHILE, SOME JEWISH SURVEYS THAT REPORT LARGER NUMBERS OF JEWS ALSO INCLUDE "CULTURAL" JEWS — THOSE WHO CONNECT TO JUDIASM THROUGH ITS TRADITIONS, BUT NOT NECESSARILY THROUGH ACTIVELY PRACTICING THE RELIGION.

MEANWHILE, NEARLY 2.8 MILLION PEOPLE NOW IDENTIFY WITH DOZENS OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS, CALLING THEMSELVES WICCAN, PAGAN OR "SPIRITUALIST," WHICH THE SURVEY DOES NOT DEFINE.

WICCA, A CONTEMPORARY FORM OF PAGANISM THAT INCLUDES GODDESS WORSHIP AND REVERENCE FOR NATURE, HAS EVEN MADE ITS WAY TO ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY, WHERE THE PENTAGON NOW ALLOWS WICCANS' FIVE-POINTED-STAR SYMBOL TO BE USED ON VETERANS' GRAVESTONES.

RELIGION AS A HOBBY

SINCE THE FIRST ARIS STUDY WAS RELEASED, OTHER MAJOR NATIONAL SURVEYS HAVE OFFERED SNAPSHOTS OF THE USA'S FAITH.

THE BAYLOR UNIVERSITY RELIGION SURVEYS IN 2006 AND 2008, EACH BASED ON 35,000 INTERVIEWS, WERE DISTINGUISHED BY A LOOK AT HOW PEOPLE DESCRIBED AND UNDERSTOOD GOD. THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE RELEASED ITS RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE SURVEY LAST YEAR, ALSO BASED ON 35,000 INTERVIEWS, MAPPING AMERICANS' BELIEFS STATE BY STATE. IT FOUND THAT 41% OF PEOPLE HAD SWITCHED THEIR RELIGION AT SOME POINT IN LIFE.

BAYLOR: HOW FAR IS HEAVEN? AT LEAST HALF WILL MAKE IT, AMERICANS SAY

PEW: HOW PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT FAITHS ANSWERED QUESTIONS ON HOLLYWOOD, HOMOSEXUALITY, POLITICS AND PRAYER

THE INITIAL ARIS REPORT IN 1990 SET THE TABLE FOR THOSE SURVEYS.

IT WAS BASED ON 113,000 INTERVIEWS, UPDATED WITH 50,000 MORE IN 2001 AND NOW 54,000 IN 2008. BECAUSE THE U.S. CENSUS DOES NOT ASK ABOUT RELIGION, THE ARIS SURVEY WAS THE FIRST COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF HOW PEOPLE IDENTIFY THEIR SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION.

KOSMIN CONCLUDED FROM THE 1990 DATA THAT MANY SAW GOD AS A "PERSONAL HOBBY," AND THAT THE USA IS "A GREENHOUSE FOR SPIRITUAL SPROUTS."

TODAY, HE SAYS, "RELIGION HAS BECOME MORE LIKE A FASHION STATEMENT, NOT A DEEP PERSONAL COMMITMENT FOR MANY."

KOSMIN IS NOW DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF SECULARISM IN SOCIETY AND CULTURE AT TRINITY COLLEGE IN HARTFORD, CONN.; ARIS CO-RESEARCHER ARIELA KEYSAR IS ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR.

THE ARIS RESEARCH ALSO LED IN QUANTIFYING AND PLANTING A LABEL ON THE "NONES" — PEOPLE WHO SAID "NONE" WHEN ASKED THE SURVEY'S BASIC QUESTION: "WHAT IS YOUR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY?"

THE SURVEY ITSELF MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO A HIGHER RATE OF REPORTING AS SOCIOLOGISTS BEGAN ANALYZING THE NEWLY IDENTIFIED NONES. "THE NONES MAY HAVE FELT MORE FREE TO STEP FORWARD, LESS LOOKED UPON AS OUTCASTS" AFTER THE ARIS RESULTS WERE PUBLISHED, KEYSAR SAYS.

OREGON ONCE LED THE NATION IN NONES (18% IN 1990), BUT IN 2008 THE LEADER, WITH 34%, WAS VERMONT, WHERE NONES SIGNIFICANTLY OUTNUMBER EVERY OTHER GROUP.

SOCIAL MOBILITY A FACTOR

ANGER AND DISMAY OVER THE CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE SCANDAL, WHICH ERUPTED IN BOSTON IN 2002, MAY BE REFLECTED IN DECLINING RATES OF CATHOLICS ACROSS NEW ENGLAND. BUT THE TOTAL PERCENTAGE OF CATHOLICS IN THE USA DECLINED ONLY SLIGHTLY FROM 1990 TO 2008, FROM 26.2% TO 25.1%. ANALYSTS SAY IMMIGRATION AND OTHER DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS ACCOUNT FOR MOST OF THE CHANGES.

MEMBERSHIP IN NEW ENGLAND'S CATHOLIC CHURCHES IS SHRINKING AS OLDER CATHOLICS HAVE DIED OR MOVED TO SUNNIER CLIMATES. YOUNG ADULTS ARE CHOOSING NON-CATHOLIC PARTNERS, HAVING CIVIL WEDDINGS AND SKIPPING BAPTISM FOR THEIR BABIES. AND THOSE MOVING IN TO AREAS SERVED BY THE CHURCHES ARE YOUNG ADULTS WHO OFTEN FIND THEIR COMMUNITIES OF WORK AND FRIENDSHIP ONLINE, NOT IN PARISH HALLS.

SOUTH CAROLINA ALSO EXEMPLIFIES THE PROTESTANT FAITHS' SHRINKING SHARE OF THE NATIONAL RELIGION "PIE." THE STATE HAS MORE CATHOLICS (10%, UP FROM 6% IN 1990) AND THE PERCENTAGE OF NONES HAS MORE THAN TRIPLED, FROM 3% TO 10%. THE SHARE OF PROTESTANTS IS 73%, DOWN FROM 88% IN 1990.

KOSMIN AND KEYSAR ALSO FOUND A "PIETY GAP" IN HOW AMERICANS UNDERSTAND GOD: WHILE 69% SAY THEY BELIEVE IN A PERSONAL GOD, THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE ALMIGHTY, AN ADDITIONAL 30% MADE NO SUCH CONNECTION.

THE PIETY GAP DEFINES THE PRIMARY SIDES IN THE CULTURE WARS, KOSMIN SAYS.

"IT'S ABOUT GAY MARRIAGE AND ABORTION AND STEM CELLS AND THE FAMILY. IF A PERSONAL GOD SAYS, 'THOU SHALT NOT' OR 'THOU SHALT' SEE THESE A CERTAIN WAY, YOU'D TAKE IT VERY SERIOUSLY. MEANWHILE, THREE IN 10 PEOPLE AREN'T LISTENING TO THAT GOD," HE SAYS.

ADDITIONAL NARROWLY FOCUSED SURVEYS, WITH CLOSER LOOKS AT CATHOLICS, EVANGELICALS, MAINLINE PROTESTANTS, AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHRISTIANS, WILL BE RELEASED LATER THIS YEAR BY TRINITY'S PROGRAM ON PUBLIC VALUES, WHICH SPONSORED ARIS, SILK SAYS.

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT IN THE USA

HOW AMERICANS DESCRIBE THEIR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, 1990 — 2008:

(2008 ESTIMATES - IN MILLIONS)

FAITH NUMBER % OF POP 1990 % OF POP 2008 CHANGE

CATHOLIC 57.2 26.2% 25.1% -1.1%

BAPTIST 36.1 19.3% 15.8% -3.5%

NO RELIGION 34.2 8.2% 15.0% 6.8%

CHRISTIAN,

(GENERIC) 32.4 14.8% 14.2% -0.6%

PROTESTANT

(MAINLINE) 29.4 18.7% 12.9% -5.8%

DON'T KNOW/

REFUSED 11.8 2.3% 5.2% 2.9%

PENTECOSTAL/

CHARISMATIC 8.0 3.2% 3.5% 0.3%

PROTESTANTS

(OTHER) 7.1 2.6% 3.1% 0.5%

MORMON/LDS 3.2 1.4% 1.4% 0.0%

OTHERS 2.8 0.8% 1.2% 0.4%

JEWISH 2.7 1.8% 1.2% -0.6%

EASTERN

RELIGIONS 2.0 0.4% 0.9% 0.5%

MUSLIM 1.4 0.3% 0.6% 0.3%

NOTE: "CATHOLIC" INCLUDES ROMAN, GREEK AND EASTERN RITE CATHOLICS. CHRISTIAN GENERIC INCLUDES NON-DENOMINATIONAL, UNSPECIFIED CHRISTIAN AND PROTESTANT, EVANGELICAL/BORN-AGAIN. OTHER PROTESTANT INCLUDES CHURCHES OF CHRIST, JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST.

SOURCE: AMERICAN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION SURVEY 2008, BASED ON 54,000 INTERVIEWS IN 2008, MARGIN OF ERROR +/- 0.5 PERCENTAGE POINTS.

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

COUNTING CHICKENS AFTER THEY HATCH

YOUNG CHICKENS JUST A FEW DAYS OLD CAN COUNT AND PERFORM BASIC ARITHMETIC, ACCORDING TO A FLUFFY NEW STUDY. RESEARCHERS MANIPULATED OBJECTS THAT THE CHICKS HAD FORMED AN ATTACHMENT TO, MOVING THE OBJECTS BEHIND LITTLE SCREENS, AND FOUND THAT THE OBSERVANT YOUNG BIRDS KEPT TRACK OF WHERE THE OBJECTS WERE. IN EFFECT, THE CHICKS WERE SOLVING SIMPLE MATH PROBLEMS LIKE “4 – 2 = 2.”

WHILE SOME ADULT ANIMALS, INCLUDING PRIMATES AND DOGS, HAVE BEEN FOUND TO HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF BASIC MATH, RESEARCHERS HAD NOT PREVIOUSLY DEMONSTRATED NUMERICAL ABILITIES IN ANY YOUNG ANIMALS (EXCEPT FOR HUMANS). KAREN WYNN, WHO HAS REPORTED EVIDENCE OF NUMERICAL SKILLS IN HUMAN BABIES, POINTS OUT THAT THE CHICKS HAVEN’T HAD A CHANCE TO LEARN OR DEVELOP MUCH. “THIS WORK, THEN, IS A COMPELLING EXISTENCE PROOF THAT NUMERICAL UNDERSTANDING COMPRISES A BUILT-IN SYSTEM OF UNLEARNED KNOWLEDGE,” WYNN SAYS.

TO CONDUCT THE EXPERIMENT, LEAD RESEARCHER ROSA RUGANI RELIED ON TWO CHICK BEHAVIORS. FIRST, SHE USED IMPRINTING, OR THE FACT THAT CHICKS ALWAYS TRY TO STAY CLOSE TO OBJECTS THEY ARE REARED WITH - JUST AS THEY STAY CLOSE TO AND FOLLOW THEIR MOTHER AS SOON AS THEY HATCH. WHEN THE EXPERIMENTAL CHICKS FIRST HATCHED, RESEARCHERS PUT LITTLE YELLOW BALLS (ACTUALLY THE PLASTIC CONTAINERS THAT ARE FOUND INSIDE KINDER EGGS) IN THEIR CAGE. “THEY TREAT THE BALLS AS COMPANIONS,” RUGANI SAYS [SCIENCE NEWS]. NEXT, THEY EXPLOITED THE CHICKS’ TENDENCY TO TO FLOCK TOGETHER: A SOLITARY CHICK WILL TYPICALLY RUSH TO JOIN THE LARGEST GROUP OF CHICKENS IT CAN FIND. IN THE EXPERIMENT, THE RESEARCHERS PUT TWO YELLOW BALLS BEHIND ONE SCREEN AND THREE BALLS BEHIND ANOTHER SCREEN AS AN ENCLOSED CHICK LOOKED ON. WHEN THE CHICK WAS RELEASED FROM ITS ENCLOSURE, IT ZOOMED TO THE SCREEN WITH THREE BALLS.

THE STUDY, WHICH WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY B, THEN PUSHED THE CHICKS ONE STEP FARTHER, AND TESTED THEIR ABILITY TO DO BASIC ARITHMETIC. FOR EXAMPLE, RESEARCHERS PILED FOUR BALLS BEHIND ONE SCREEN AND TWO BALLS BEHIND THE OTHER, AND THEN MOVED TWO BALLS FROM ONE PILE TO THE OTHER. THE BIRDS, RUGANI SAYS, WERE ABLE TO “COUNT” THE BALLS THAT WERE MOVED TO WORK OUT WHICH SCREEN HID THE LARGER SET AT THE END OF THE TRANSFER. “THEY STILL CHOSE CORRECTLY - ADDING UP THE NUMBERS BASED ON GROUPS OF OBJECTS THEY COULDN’T SEE AT THAT MOMENT”.

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THE ARENA GOES ABROAD

GAYS UNDER THREAT IN SENEGAL

A MOB GATHERED NEAR A MOSQUE OUTSIDE DAKAR. THEY WERE THERE TO HUNT DOWN AND KILL NINE MEN ACCUSED OF HOMOSEXUAL ACTS.

EARLIER THIS WEEK THE NINE SENEGALESE AIDS ACTIVISTS WERE FREED FROM EIGHT-YEAR-PRISON TERMS FOR ALLEGED HOMOSEXUAL ACTS, BUT THEY WENT INTO HIDING BECAUSE OF DEATH THREATS FROM MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND THE GENERAL POPULATION.

“THE HOMOSEXUALS WILL NOT ESCAPE LYNCHING. THEY WILL BE FISH FOOD,” DAKAR NEWSPAPER L'OBSERVEUR QUOTED A LOCAL YOUTH LEADER AS SAYING.

“GAY MEN WILL NEVER BE FREE IN SENEGAL. THEY EXPOSE US ALL TO DANGER,” SAID IMAM MBAYE NIANG, A PROMINENT RELIGIOUS LEADER AND MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT. “THE JUDGES SHOULD UNDERSTAND THAT SENEGALESE PEOPLE NEED TO PROTECT THEIR CHILDREN, THEIR FAMILIES FROM HOMOSEXUALITY.”

IN SENEGAL — WHERE 95 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION IS MUSLIM — HOMOSEXUAL ACTS ARE PUNISHABLE BY FINES AND UP TO FIVE YEARS IN PRISON. IN JANUARY, THE NINE MEN RECEIVED THE HARSHEST SENTENCE YET FOR SUCH AN OFFENSE IN SENEGAL, GETTING THE MAXIMUM OF FIVE YEARS AND AN ADDITIONAL THREE FOR CRIMINAL CONSPIRACY.

THOUGH WIDELY SUPPORTED IN SENEGAL, THE CONVICTION WAS CONDEMNED BY INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS AND FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS, MOST NOTABLY FRANCE.

“THEY WERE JUDGED AND CONDEMNED VERY SEVERELY, SURELY ON THE BASIS OF PUBLIC OUTCRY, THEREFORE THE JUSTICE WAS NEITHER OBJECTIVE NOR FOUNDED IN LAW,” SAID LEAD DEFENSE ATTORNEY BARIM SASSOUM SY, WHO CALLED THE INITIAL RULING HASTY AND EMOTIONAL.

A DAKAR APPEALS COURT OVERTURNED THAT DECISION MONDAY, CITING VIOLATIONS OF LEGAL PROTOCOL.

ACTING ON AN ANONYMOUS TIP, POLICE HAD ARRESTED THE MEN — MOST OF WHOM DO HIV PREVENTION WORK IN THE "MEN HAVING SEX WITH MEN" COMMUNITY — IN DECEMBER AT THE HOME OF A PROMINENT GAY ACTIVIST. BUT THE POLICE DID NOT HAVE A SEARCH WARRANT, NOR DID THEY CATCH THE MEN IN THE ACT, WHICH IS REQUIRED BY THE SENEGALESE LAW PROHIBITING “INDECENT ACTS AGAINST NATURE." THE JUDGE HEARING THE APPEAL THEREFORE DECLARED THEIR CONVICTIONS NULL AND VOID, SY SAID.

YET EVEN AS SMILING ATTORNEYS AND SUPPORTERS CELEBRATED IN THE PACKED COURTROOM MONDAY AND EXCHANGED CONGRATULATIONS, PLANS WERE ALREADY IN PLACE TO GET THE FREED MEN INTO HIDING OUTSIDE DAKAR.

“THE FIRST JUDGE SENTENCED THEM TO EIGHT YEARS,” SAID IMAM NIANG. “HE HAD THE COURAGE TO SAY IT. THE JUDGE THAT LET THEM GO WAS MUCH LESS COURAGEOUS. HE YIELDED TO INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE.”

NIANG SAID THAT IN ISLAM, THE PUNISHMENT FOR HOMOSEXUALITY IS DEATH. TO BE GAY IS A CHOICE, HE SAID, ADDING THAT HE BELIEVES HOMOSEXUALITY IS AN IMPURE, CORRUPTIVE FORCE THREATENING TO INFECT SENEGALESE SOCIETY, PARTICULARLY ITS YOUTH.

“IN OUR SOCIETY, HOMOSEXUALITY WILL NEVER BE ACCEPTED,” NIANG SAID. “OUR RELIGION FORBIDS IT, SO WE CAN NEVER ACCEPT IT, EVEN IF IT IS ACCEPTED EVERYWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD.”

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FAMOUS QUOTES

JAPANESE PROVERB

"IF YOU BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU READ, YOU BETTER NOT READ."