

## A New "Declaration of Independence" in Religion and Politics

*The New American Religious Identification Survey says fewer people are calling themselves Christians or identifying with particular denominations, and more people are claiming no religion at all. Are you concerned? Is America losing its religion? Is America losing faith?*

1.....The post-prosperity American mood is to call yourself nothing, identify yourself with no institutions political, religious, or cultural. It's an unsigned second "Declaration of Independence." Whatever "identification" question a pollster asks, the answer will mean "I am *me*."

2.....We can't know whether there are fewer *actual* Christians, but "fewer people are calling themselves Christians." The acceptable options for self-identification in religion have been increasing. And the unacceptable behavior of some Christians has reduced the respectability, the social advantage, of calling oneself Christian.

3.....Yes, and "fewer people are...identifying with particular denominations." This trend became noticeable after World War Two. At the local level, *community churches* (some of them federations, most of them independent of denominational identification) became popular. (Throughout the 1950s, I was pastor of one; and at a 1956 World Council of Churches gathering I represented the [American] National Council of Community Churches.) But while councils of churches became stronger at all levels (local, area, state, nation, world), mergers of congregations to form one church ("all Christians in one place") in a community were rare. The laity became decreasingly interested in a congregation's historical background, but most clergy continued to be trained in denominational (traditional-historical) theological seminaries.

4.....Beginning with the national merger, in 1957, of four denominational traditions to form "a united and uniting church," the United Church of Christ, most denominations accommodated to some degree to the reality that American Christians were decreasingly interested in churches' historical background and increasingly pragmatic, choosing a local church for non-denominational and non-theological reasons. Some *loss* of historical riches, some *gain* in practicality and community.

5.....That "more people are claiming no religion at all" (15% of Americans, the Survey reports) calls for some parsing. Most American children grow up with *no formal experience of religious devotion and no education in religion*, precisely the experience of a group of American-university students from China I met with recently. Cut loose from religion, what will the human devotion-impulse attach itself to? Money, said Jesus ("You cannot serve God and money"). Money, say the Chinese. Money, said the Americans until the Collapse (Peggy Noonan's word-preference to "recession" or "depression"). / Ironic: The university in which I met with those Chinese students has a required course in economics but none in ethics, philosophy, or religion.

6.....While the percentage of Americans claiming "no religion at all" has been rising, the percentage doing nothing with their devotion-impulse is zero. These days, the first thing you see on page one of the Wall Street Journal is a green strip at the top (green symbolizing hope), always including the word "Sports." *Sports-devotion* is the religion-substitute for millions of Americans. Of course the Journal is using the green strip as some relief from the gloom of the black print below it. But would that print be so gloomy if Wall Street had not used money as a sport?

7.....When I was jobless, I looked on my condition optimistically and euphemistically as "between jobs." I look on people who claim "no religion at all" as between religions. Unless they are deeply depressed, their devotion-impulse is active; and to the extent that it is social (involving them with other persons), their devotion-impulse is the spirit in a body, a "religion." But I have a worry: people who identify themselves as religionless are vulnerable to conversion. I am concerned that the *quality* of what they may be converted to will be inferior to America's founding religion, a mix of Christianity and the Enlightenment. "Is America losing its religion?" I must say yes, and pray that the loss is only temporary.

8..... "Is America losing faith?" I hope not. A series of *holocausts* has burned up people, religious devotion, morality, trust, confidence, money, and jobs. So much death that it almost seems as though only God is not dead. But forest firefighters look forward to the life that springs forth from the ground after the fires.



## Comments

Please report offensive comments below.

"How do you explain the fact that god is not interested in human affairs?"

Human affairs are a manifestation of "god" as are all the manifestations of life. Life with consciousness is an extremely high manifestation, but, in keeping with free choice, it is what we make of it.

POSTED BY: [EDBYRONADAMS](#) | MARCH 24, 2009 7:44 PM

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I think religion as a club is awful and detestable. In the case of christianity, it goes directly against its teachings. And yet I don't see how this can be avoided by religious people.

After reading this post, the general impression I have is that even Mr. Elliott sounds a little like loving his club and seeing the rest as lost souls in the end.

My worry is: If Mr. Elliott sounds this way, what hopes do we have for the rest of the religious pastors or leaders to consider religion not as a club?

Since you may be reading this, Mr. Elliott: If you do see non-believers as lost souls\* or less than\* believers, how do you prevent this feeling from standing in between you and seeing everybody as one big family?

Concerning item 8, the phrase that seems to make a better fit would be...so much death that it seems god does not exist. Doesn't it?

In your own words Mr. Elliott (no bible citing): How do you explain the fact that god is not interested in human affairs?

POSTED BY: [BIOS](#) | MARCH 23, 2009 9:25 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr. Elliot - thanks for your response. I thought it might be an interesting counterpoint to post Dan Dennett's in person review of Rick Warren's recommended book here.

I was sorry to here that evangelist Warren is once again beating the tired old fundamentalist anti-evolution drum as part of his sermon on the purpose-driven life....surely you don't agree with that part? I know you're quite liberal as regards you social philosophy, and we're completely in sync in that area.

Anyway, Dennett is an inspiring preacher himself, although the gospel of science is obviously his bag. I find my own spiritual orientation as being somewhere between Warren and Dennett, but probably leaning more heavily toward the science that Dennett captures so adroitly and shall I say masterfully, in his books and talks.

With all due respect, I believe that while I'm a big Obama fan, Rick Warren is probably history as a public figure, following the Obama invocation. I noticed he was published by Zondervan, a big Christian publisher in Grand Rapids - a place (and sub-culture) I'm very familiar with.

I honestly think you would find the orthodox Calvinists in G.R. and elsewhere in Southwest Michigan leaning somewhat to the right of your own (far more) liberal orientation - and a position that we share.

again, warmest regards -

[http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/dan\\_dennett\\_s\\_response\\_to\\_rick\\_warren.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/dan_dennett_s_response_to_rick_warren.html)

POSTED BY: PERSIFLAGE | MARCH 23, 2009 5:52 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO PERSIFLAGE:

Thank you for reading me, & congratulations on reading material you disagree with. So many read only for confirmation of their opinions.

May I suggest you give a slow read to something else you'll disagree with? Rick Warren's "The Purpose-Driven Life" has proved out to be more than a book: an event.

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 23, 2009 2:07 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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I think. Therefore I am an atheist.

POSTED BY: COLINNICHOLAS | MARCH 23, 2009 12:31 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Greetings Dr. Elliot - I read both Otto and Eliade back in E. Thomas Lawson's religion class somewhere around 1968 at WMU....and still have both.

U of C almost single-handedly staffed the entire religion department at WMU back in the day, as I recall - truly a great bunch of teachers! Tom was a true maestro in the classroom.....and retired now, I see.

For better or worse, Buddhism is the only religious pastime that still rings my bell....but back then, and following Dan Dennett's more recent proviso, I set out to instruct highschoolers in the academic study of religion - but it never did come to pass and we're still waiting.

I never made any money with that degree, but it was the most fun I ever had in college! I always enjoy your column.

best regards -

POSTED BY: PERSIFLAGE | MARCH 22, 2009 4:51 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO IVRI5768:

Yes, indeed, people can worship institutions. Anything we human beings can experience or think of, "under God," can be the focus of OUR INNATE DEVOTION-DRIVE & thus an IDOL.

The Bible defines idolatry plainly. It's "worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, who is worthy of eternal praise" (Romans 1:25). The Bible's first verse defines what "the creature" or creation is: the universe ("the heavens and the earth").

The devotion-drive is always active, though its strength varies from person to person and from culture to culture, nobody is constantly aware of it, and some deny its existence. The earliest academic discipline to study it was philosophy of religion; then came psychology of religion; then, sociology of religion; then, anthropology of religion. It is as real as other drives - hunger, thirst, sex, curiosity, sense-making. It involves the full range both of feelings and of virtues/vices.

One specialty within the psychology of religion is the study of the denial-response. What are the motivations for, and consequences of, denying that the devotion-drive is innate?

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 22, 2009 4:20 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO PAGANPLACE:

Amen on "not to rule." America's singular contribution to governmental theory is the freedom of "church" & "state" from each other as institutions.

The theory assumes that both C. & S. will be vigorous. When they are, both are "under God." When C. is weak, the people are oppressed by statism. When S. is weak, the people are oppressed by clericalism.

A secularist assumption is that the people can be free without C. It hasn't happened, & probably can't. Wise old Wm.Penn put it memorably: "Man [i.e., people] will serve God or tyrants."

I always appreciate your witness.

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 22, 2009 3:40 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Willis,

There are many kinds of idolatry. Some make idols of their religious institutions, wouldn't you say?

POSTED BY: IVRI5768 | MARCH 22, 2009 12:45 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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"Sports-devotion is the religion-substitute for millions of Americans."

Sports devotion is merely a displacement activity related to tribal identity and war now that killing the "other" close at hand is forbidden.

Perhaps Rev. Elliot has inadvertently hit upon the explanation for the "no atheist in a foxhole" phenomenon. Instead of a devotion-impulse, it is just a yearning for your tribal linebackers to show up.

POSTED BY: EDBYRONADAMS | MARCH 22, 2009 12:12 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Yes, Glade, you do all that. It is "I","I","I"....and you ignore God up to the point that you die and then what?

What do you do when the Jesus you were told about, that you know somewhere down inside is real, confronts you and says to you- why?

Your website has a atheist saying....

"Personally, I have never seen, read, heard, tasted or smelled anything compelling to prove there is a creator, so this planet (not 'this creation') is all I have."

Look around you! All this beauty, complexity, molecules ordered perfectly, with a sun and a earth tilted at the perfect angle, revolving around the sun at the perfect distance, with a orbiting moon that ensures the oceans tide is perfect to keep its nutrients flushed and reimbursed, and the massive complexity of the human biological unit- the trees, and the grasses, the animals, all of this just "IS"?

Personally, I think anyone that thinks this is just fooling themselves so they can self indulge. You worship yourself, my friend, and this is obvious in your posts.

Jesus loves all of us and THIS is the truth that Jesus was alluding to when Pilate asked "what is truth".

Look to the cross. That is where all of humanity 's hope lies. THAT is something to have faith in.

Again, if you put "Love your neighbor as yourself? BEFORE "Love the Lord thy God with all you heart soul and mind"- the 2nd commandment can't work as well without the first one.

POSTED BY: COUNTERWW | MARCH 22, 2009 11:54 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Hi, Rev. Elliott.

"I look on people who claim "no religion at all" as between religions. Unless they are deeply depressed, their devotion-impulse is active; and to the extent that it is social (involving them with other persons), their devotion-impulse is the spirit in a body, a "religion." "

This means to me that this is no time to be isolating ourselves along the lines drawn by those who sought 'devotion,' also 'diversion,' and denial. With corporate 'luxuries' and ever-ready 'spankings' and projections upon others. To preserve something rather unreal.

Someone your age, sir, I don't much care how you try to interpret these happenings to try and make people 'believe' the same old things that got us here,

I want to point at some practical stuff you may remember, ..machines, factories, Victory Gardens, say, 'Hey. Old dudes.... Do those still work?'

Have a little bit of faith, Reverend. Social issues and religious-political BS are what got us into this mess. I assure you, there have been worse messes in human history.

Only question is how much it costs. In knowings that cost a lot, that we could be using.

"But I have a worry: people who identify themselves as religionless are vulnerable to conversion. I am concerned that the quality of what they may be converted to will be inferior to America's founding religion, a mix of Christianity and the Enlightenment. "Is America losing its religion?" I must say yes, and pray that the loss is only temporary."

America is designed to be able to cope with everything from radical Christianity \*to\* strident atheism.

Actually, it's all about the \*Enlightenment\* part. That allows us, as clergy, both to be here. To participate, follow, or even lead.

Not to rule. That'd be a step way back.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | MARCH 21, 2009 3:24 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO GLADERUNNER:

In addition to my "hobby" note, I sent you two long notes (taking a total of about five hours), but neither got posted - perhaps because a didn't DOUBLE-click "Submit." I'm now too time-pressed even to summarize what I said in taking you seriously.

Our chief disagreement is on whether what I call the "devotion-impulse" is of the human essence: are we body/mind/spirit or only (as you think) body/mind? I can hardly suggest that you read Mircea Eliade (ed.) 20-vol. "Encyclopedia of Religion"! But a brief classic on "spirit" is Rudolf Otto's "Das Heilige" (Eng., "The Idea of the Holy.") I'm too modest to mention my own "Flow of Flesh, Reach of Spirit."

I hope my usual greeting does not offend you:  
GOD BLESS YOU!

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 21, 2009 1:43 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO HAPPY ATHEIST:

You say well where you are & why you are "happy."

Your "inner peace" is like that of a divorcee who has escaped a horrendous marriage. In your case, the marriage was to what you experienced as an oppressive "evangelical childhood."

My childhood was religion-free in the sense that my parents were not churchgoers. I was free to explore the religions, & become a dean of religion & philosophy. No experience of religion as oppressive. And I became an evangelical-liberal Christian with "inner peace" & joy & hope, with a long record of participation in what my church's confession of faith (the United Church of Christ) calls "the struggle for justice and peace."

In religion, you & I have moved in opposite directions. We differ in that I cannot agree with your dogma that "there is no ultimate Truth." I believe that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, "full of grace and truth" (Gospel of John 1:14).

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 21, 2009 1:04 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO ASHLEYBONE:

Your Mar.21 comment is unaware of the context, which was Graderunner's comparison of giving up stamp collecting AS A HOBBY with giving up religion. And I certainly didn't intend a reference to "once-saved always-saved": millions of so-called "saved" give up being "saved."

As for your Mar.19 comment, I certainly do not believe "that atheists are people who deny god [only] so they can follow hedonistic lifestyles." As a university professor & dean, I had atheist associates & students with a wide range of reasons for not believing in God. Some atheists say they didn't like having religious leaders (to use your expression) "ranting at them."

Thank you for your comments. I hope to learn something from every comment, & hope my readers learn something from me.

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | MARCH 21, 2009 12:39 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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I didn't see this until today:

"Two decades ago you had a religion & gave it up. What does that prove? That is was a hobby.

Seventy-four years ago I was converted to Christianity & haven't given it up. What does that prove? That it wasn't a hobby."

Wow. You finally quit torturing us with your "American Mind" garbage (atheists aren't real Americans!), only to switch to a thinly veiled once-saved always-saved slur. You seem to have a really ugly streak.

POSTED BY: ASHLEYBONE | MARCH 21, 2009 11:03 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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I am a happy atheist. I'm not depressed. I'm not between religions. It took a couple decades to cut the strings of my evangelical childhood, but now that I have, I feel extraordinary inner peace. I am completely satisfied by the rational information my physical environment provides. That is, life is temporary, life is what you make of it, the lives of other human beings (and ultimately, all life on Earth) are important to me because I evolved to survive and procreate, and finally, that there is no ultimate Truth other than those truths we create for ourselves.

What else do I need?

As a person, I'm simple, humble, honest, and devoted to my family, friends, society, and the Earth. I'm not at all obsessed with money, drugs, sex or any other vice that seem to keep Christians awake at night. I'm married, I'm faithful, and I believe strongly in laws that promote the common good. I work in education, volunteer, and have formed a non-profit organization to teach children American civics. If you had to label me, you might describe me as a humanist or environmentalist.

My Christian childhood feels a little like a bad, delusional fever-dream of guilt, shame, fear, hate, forced-hypocrisy, lies, misplaced trust, confusion, unwelcome peer-pressure, anti-intellectualism, feigned ritual, cheap perfume and tiresome obligation. I'm glad it's over. I'm glad I can just be a simple person now.

C.A.

[www.theconsummateatheist.wordpress.com](http://www.theconsummateatheist.wordpress.com)

POSTED BY: HAPPYATHEIST | MARCH 21, 2009 12:58 AM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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I have a book recommendation for all of you. It debunks the belief that loss of religion automatically means the collapse of society. Please read Phil Zuckerman's book: Society Without God. 'nuff said.

POSTED BY: CADDIEO | MARCH 20, 2009 10:11 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Mr. Elliott: "Seventy-four years ago I was converted to Christianity & haven't given it up. What does that prove? That it wasn't a hobby."

So my 20+ years as a church-going, praying, witnessing, miracle believing, christian was a hobby? I used the parable simply to point out a similarity. My experience with stamp collecting and religion were virually the same. Over time I completely lost interest in both. I was telling you this to counter your assertion that a person in my position, without faith in a spiritual or cosmic or mystical realm, was merely 'between jobs' or using some other physical lust, money or sports as a replacement. This is not about hobbies sir, it is about the delusion that all people everywhere have something like the faith that you have or are a mere nudge away from being certified converts, or that religion is like a brain, something that everyone is born with and is vital to life itself. I was simply offering you the perspective of someone who disagrees with that assertion. If you have not been completely, totally free of faith and religion as I have, I doubt that you are qualified to assume that your capacity for faith and it's level of importance to you is universal. I certainly don't presume religious people are just one disappointment or rational thought away from becoming atheists...

As always, thank you for the discussion.

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | MARCH 19, 2009 4:54 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Mr. Elliot,

I challenge you to back up this statement from bullet five, "Cut loose from religion, what will the human devotion-impulse attach itself to? Money, said Jesus ..." with some actual evidence that the non-religious in this country are more concerned or obsessed with money than the religious. I've never seen any study on this issue, and I suspect you're just making this up. This charge is little more than the standard theist lie that atheists are people who deny god so they can follow hedonistic lifestyles.

In my personal experience, the Christians I know are every bit as concerned with wealth and stature as any atheist I've met. In fact, the ones in my life seem more concerned with these things, but I suspect my perception may be off due to confirmation bias.



I definitely agree with bullet six. College football is infinitely superior to all forms of religion. It's exciting, you can't predict the outcome, and there's no prehistoric gurus, mullahs, or priests ranting at you. More sport, less war, religion, and screwing each other over for personal advantage.

POSTED BY: ASHLEYBONE | MARCH 19, 2009 4:30 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO GLADRUNNER:

I, too, was passionate about stamp-collecting & did not replace it with another hobby.

Two decades ago you had a religion & gave it up. What does that prove? That is was a hobby.

Seventy-four years ago I was converted to Christianity & haven't given it up. What does that prove? That it wasn't a hobby.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 19, 2009 4:19 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Not to put too fine a point on it, but to clarify, another true 'parable'.

I used to collect stamps. For several years I received postage stamps on approval. I would look through them, pay for the ones I wanted and returned the rest. I had a large stamp album and all the tools and supplies of the trade. I spent several hours each month picking, mounting, studying and shopping for stamps. After several years I found myself drifting away from that hobby. Sometime about twenty five years ago I realized that I was no longer spending any time on it, spending no money, and frankly, and quite literally I was no longer even thinking about it. It was no longer part of my life. I still had the time and money, but no longer the passion. It simply slipped out of my life completely without having to be replaced. Sure I spend idle time doing other things, but not with that much time, focus, expense, devotion, or passion. It simply was no longer part of my life. There was no 'replacement' hobby. As a wiser person once said, "Not collecting stamps is not a hobby" any more than not having a religion is a religion'.

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | MARCH 19, 2009 1:50 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Mr. Elliot: " Cut loose from religion, what will the human devotion-impulse attach itself to?"

I am 'cut loose' from religion, I have been for a couple of decades. I have no idea what a devotion-impulse is, nor do I assume or believe it exists in all people as you claim. You seem to be saying that everyone will worship something... I disagree with that premise. Some may be searching for a replacement for religion, or a god, but I assure you not everyone is.

"I look on people who claim "no religion at all" as between religions. Unless they are deeply depressed, their devotion-impulse is active"

I disagree, I am not depressed. I am not seeking a new or replacement religion. I go to work, spend time with my family, enjoy weekends, see the occasional movie, enjoy friendships, mow the lawn, belong to a couple of volunteer groups and I'm not at all wealthy nor am I a money or sports worshipper... and I've never been happier, all without a single feeling of need to define a supernatural force or being... Please explain that.

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | MARCH 19, 2009 12:13 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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