

**Publication:**Reading Eagle;**Date:**Mar 20, 2009;**Section:**Opinion;**Page Number:**17

## Religion driving people from God

**Leonard Pitts Jr. is a syndicated columnist for Tribune Media Services.**

We are losing our religion.

That is the startling conclusion of a new study, the American Religious Identification Survey, conducted by researchers at Trinity College of Hartford, Conn. The poll of more than 54,000 American adults found a sharp erosion in the number of people claiming religious affiliation.

The number of people who call themselves Christian is 76 percent, down 10 percentage points since 1990. Thirty percent of married couples did not have a religious ceremony. Better than one-in-four Americans do not expect a religious funeral.

In raw numbers, there are about 22 million more Christians now than in 1990. Still, the trend is clear, particularly as illustrated in one statistic: In 1990, 8.2 percent, about 14 million of us, said none when asked to specify their religion. Last year, 15 percent, about 34 million, did so.

Some have suggested our loss of faith is due to increased diversity, mobility and immigration. But I tend to think the most important cause is simpler: Religion has become an ugly thing.

People of faith usually respond to that ugliness — by which I mean a seemingly endless cycle of scandal, controversy, hypocrisy, violence and television preachers saying idiotic things — in one of two ways. Either they defend it, making them part of the problem, or they regard it as a series of isolated episodes.

People of faith should ask themselves: What is the cumulative effect upon outside observers of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker living like lords on the largesse of the poor, multiplied by Jimmy Swaggart's pornography addiction, plus Eric Rudolph bombing Olympians and gays in the name of God, plus Muslims hijacking airplanes in the name of God, multiplied by the church that kicked out some members because they voted Democrat, divided by people caterwauling on courthouse steps as a rock bearing the Ten Commandments was removed, multiplied by the square root of Catholic priests preying on little boys while the church looked on and did nothing, multiplied by Muslims rioting over cartoons, plus the ongoing demonization of gay men and lesbians, divided by all those traditional values coalitions and family values councils that try to bully public schools into becoming worship houses, with morning prayers and science lessons from the book of Genesis? Then subtract selflessness, service, sacrifice, holiness and hope.

Who can be surprised if the sheer absurdity, fundamentalist cruelty and ungodly hypocrisy that have characterized so much religion in the last 30 years have driven people away? If all I knew of God was what I had seen in the headlines, I would not be eager to make his acquaintance. I am thankful I know more.

Included in what I know is the fact that God and religion are not synonymous. God is, for the faithful at least, the sovereign creator of all creation. Religion is what men and women put in place, ostensibly to worship and serve him. Too often, though, religion worships and serves that which has nothing to do with him: money, politics, charisma, ego, intolerance and self.

The American Religious Identification Survey should serve as a wake-up call to organized religion. It continues in this manner at the risk of irrelevance.



Leonard Pitts Jr.

