

THE APATHY GENERATION

*The Latent Religious
Beliefs of Millennials*

GREY MATTER RESEARCH & CONSULTING
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

2010



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INTRODUCTION

This report from Grey Matter Research & Consulting on the religious beliefs of adults age 18 – 29 was originally presented at the NRB Research Symposium in Dallas in 2010.

Before describing Millennials, we need to define them. Generational definitions and classifications have challenged researchers and sociologists for a long time, and they continue to do so. While “Baby Boomers” are fairly well understood as the group of Americans born between 1946 and 1964, other age cohorts are not as clearly defined.

For instance, the generation after the Baby Boom has been called the Baby Busters, Generation X, GenX, the 13th Generation, and other names. The “younger generation” currently in the process of coming of age has been called Millennials, Mosaics, Generation Y, Generation Next, Echo Boomers, the Net Generation, and other things.

For this report, we’ll use the following generational groups:

- Millennials: 18 – 29 years old
- Generation X: 30 – 44 years old
- Baby Boomers: 45 – 63 years old
- The Silent Generation (Silents): 64 or older

If you tend to use different names or slightly different age breaks, there’s nothing to say you are wrong, but this is what Grey Matter Research & Consulting uses based on common application by a number of other research groups and common understanding in the industry.



MILLENNIALS’ FAITH EXPERIENCE

So, religiously speaking, who are the Millennials? There is plenty of data from the Pew Foundation, Baylor University, LifeWay Research, and many other groups that provide basic definitions and information, so in this report we’ll focus on proprietary work conducted by Grey Matter Research.

In brief, our research fills in some of the blanks and provides a portrait of a generation that has many of the same basic beliefs as prior generations, but has less experience with religion, has less awareness of it, and places less emphasis on it. They may believe the same things, but those beliefs are more likely to be theoretical rather than practical, failing to impact their daily lives and activities to a great extent.

Various research studies have shown – and many clergy will tell you anecdotally – that Millennials are less likely to be regular churchgoers than are older adults. (Keep in mind that “older adults” throughout this report refers to those who are 30 and older – not senior citizens.)

Yet it appears that being unchurched is not something that suddenly just happened when Millennials hit adulthood. According to a Grey Matter Research study, the proportion of today’s adults who attended religious worship services on a regular basis prior to being in the first grade was about the same for all four generations (Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation) – around 72% overall. The same thing is true for the proportion who attended during elementary school – 83% overall. But around the time of junior high school, something happened with Millennials that had not happened with previous generations – they started dropping out of regular religious participation.

Just 65% of today’s Millennial adults said they attended worship services regularly at some point while they were in junior high school. While this is the same as with Generation X (64%), it is substantially lower than for Boomers (78%) or Silents (85%). And once they were in high school, only 48% of today’s Millennial adults were attending worship regularly, compared to 57% among Generation X, 67% among Boomers, and 77% among Silents. In other words, Silents are actually 7% *more* likely to have attended services in high school than they were to have attended prior to first grade; Millennials are 34% *less* likely to have attended in high school than they were to have done so prior to first grade.

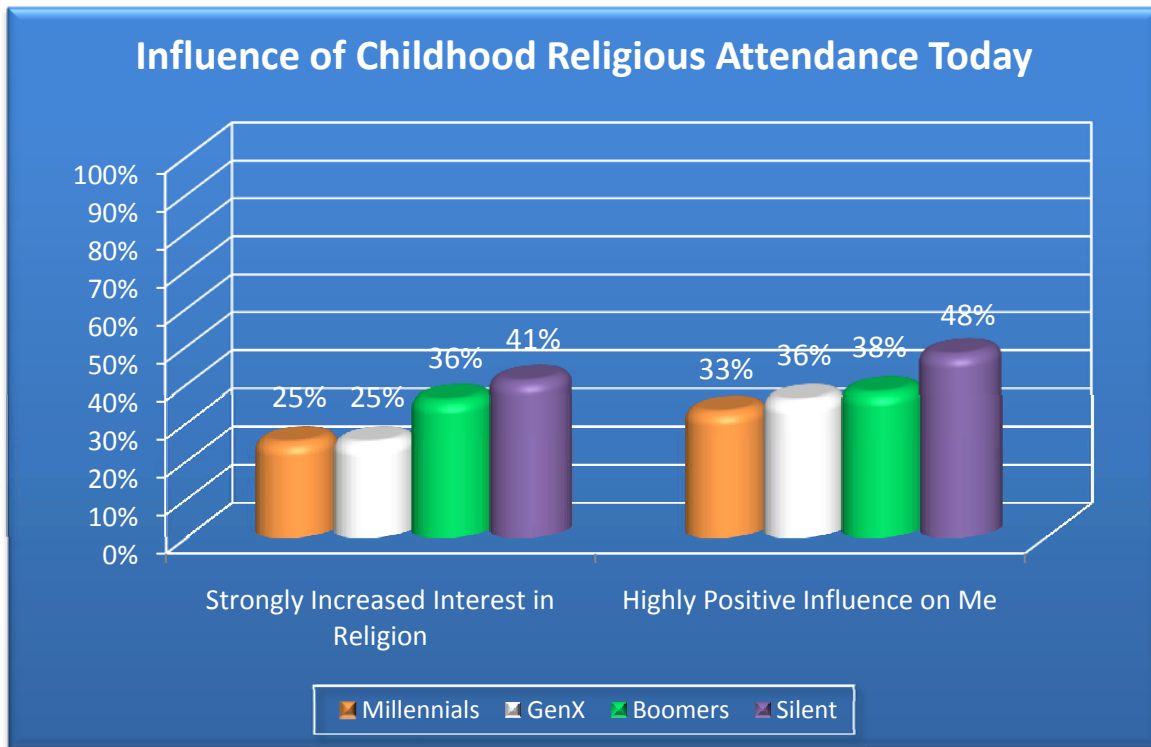
Research has long shown that during the transition from teen years to adulthood (from 16 or 17 through the early 20s), Americans have historically tended to move away from religious participation, then often started returning as they mature and have children of their own. What our research suggests is that for Millennials, this transition away from church started happening earlier than it did for other generational groups – as early as junior high school, rather than during the college age years. We hear so much that “kids grow up sooner these days” – apparently this extends to religious participation as well.



THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION

Possibly because so many Millennials were exposed to organized religion primarily as very young children rather than as teens, today they also tend to feel their childhood religious participation had less impact on them than do adults in other age cohorts. Looking back on their religious attendance prior to age 18, Millennials are less likely than other adults to say their childhood involvement made them much more interested in religion as an adult, or to feel it had a highly positive influence on their life today. In addition, Millennials are somewhat less likely to feel their childhood attendance has given them a good moral foundation, provided

important religious knowledge, or helped them prepare for life as an adult, according to our research.



In general, religion just is not quite as important to Millennials right now as it is to older Americans. Note that in Grey Matter Research studies:

- Only 65% of Millennials say their religious faith is very important in their life today, compared to 71% of Generation X, 78% of Boomers, and 80% of Silents
- Just 35% of Millennials agree strongly that they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today, compared to 41% of Generation X, 51% of Boomers, and 54% of Silents
- Only 26% of Millennials agree strongly that eternal salvation is possible through God’s grace alone; that nothing we do can earn salvation – compared to 31% among Generation X, 32% among Boomers, and 40% among Silents

And according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 26% of Millennials are unaffiliated with any religion or religious tradition, compared to an average of 16% among the American population

This doesn't mean Millennials are unlikely to hold basic, orthodox Christian beliefs. Indeed, we find no difference between Millennials and other age groups on things such as the belief that:

- The Bible is the written word of God and is totally accurate in all that it teaches
- They, personally, have a responsibility to tell other people about their religious beliefs
- Jesus was sinless when he lived on earth
- There is such a thing as sin
- God is the omniscient, omnipotent, perfect ruler of the universe

Notice that on issues of *belief*, Millennials are often quite similar to other age groups. It's on the issues of *importance* of their religious faith, on *commitment* to Jesus Christ, on the *absolutism* of reliance on grace, and on *active affiliation* with a religious group or tradition, that they lag other generational groups.

The beliefs are there, but often not in a way that directs Millennials to behave differently or be strongly committed to those beliefs. Religious belief tends to be about as present in Millennials as it is in other age groups, but it is more likely to be latent than active. Religion lives more in the background than in the foreground. It is somewhat more theoretical than real.



THOUGHTS ON SIN AND BEHAVIOR

Millennials have acquired a reputation for being more lenient and liberal on things ranging from sexuality to abortion to drinking and drug use. Yet their willingness to call various things “sin” usually is no different than among older generations. Grey Matter Research asked people to tell us whether they considered 30 different behaviors to be “sin” or not. Millennials are just as likely (or unlikely) as other age groups to define 22 of those 30 items as sin, including:

- drinking any alcohol
- getting drunk
- being significantly overweight
- racism
- telling a “little white lie” to avoid hurting someone’s feelings
- using “hard” drugs such as cocaine, heroine, meth, LSD, etc.
- smoking marijuana
- spanking your child when he/she misbehaves

- sex before marriage
- homosexual thoughts
- sexual thoughts about someone you are not married to
- not attending church or religious worship services on a regular basis
- making a lot of money
- not giving 10% of your income to a church or charity
- watching an R-rated movie
- not reporting some income on your tax returns
- not saying anything if a cashier gives you too much change back
- swearing
- gambling
- playing the lottery
- having an abortion
- dancing

Probably reflecting societal norms as much as spiritual ones, Millennials are actually *more* likely than older Americans to say that using tobacco is a sin (37% to 22%). The same is true about “not taking proper care of your body” (47% to 34%). They are also slightly more likely to say working on the Sabbath is a sin (19% to 13%).

The behaviors Millennials are less likely to define as sinful included adultery (66% to 83%), homosexual activity or sex (44% to 53%), reading or watching pornography (42% to 51%), gossip (39% to 48%), and, flying in the face of all the stereotypes that have Millennials as particularly “green,” doing things as a consumer that harm the environment (32% to 42%).

So yes, Millennials do have a definition of sin that, particularly in areas of sexuality, does differ somewhat from that of older generations. But it’s far more similar to other generations than it is different. And in areas where Millennials are often seen as more liberal – abortion, drinking, sex before marriage, smoking marijuana, homosexual thoughts – there are no differences.

Why, then, do many political surveys show Millennials to be far more liberal than other ages on things such as legalizing same-sex marriage or legalizing marijuana? Why have so many Millennials tired of the debates over abortion and homosexuality? Why is there so much cohabitation, binge drinking, and casual sex among Millennials?

Again, it comes down to the difference between *beliefs* and *actions* or *commitment*. Millennials may believe abortion is a sin (and a majority do), but that doesn’t necessarily mean they feel they have the right to dictate their beliefs to others. They may personally see homosexual activity as sinful (and almost half do), but that doesn’t mean they want to deny someone else the ability to live however they want to. They may think getting drunk (37%) or having sex

before marriage (49%) are sinful, but those beliefs won't necessarily influence their actual actions related to drinking or sex.



LACK OF AWARENESS

Their relatively lack of religious experience (past and present) has also made Millennials less knowledgeable and aware of what's going on around them religiously, as well as less positive toward religious institutions (although not necessarily hostile to them). Religion is just not something that is *experientially* as important to them. They still often maintain relatively strong spiritual or religious beliefs, but they are less aware of and interested in the religious perspectives of others.

For instance, Grey Matter Research asked people about the quality of education kids get in various kinds of schools. Perceptions about the quality of charter schools, public schools, and private non-religious schools do not vary according to age group. Yet Millennials give significantly lower ratings to the quality of education children receive in private Christian schools than do other age groups. They are less likely than other age groups to say private Christian schools are where students are most likely to receive a strong foundation of morals, values, and citizenship, and less likely than others to say private Christian schools are where students will best be prepared for life after graduation.

We also asked people a number of questions about what is legal and not legal today regarding faith in the public arena. Millennials are substantially more likely than other age groups to believe each of the following is currently completely legal, and not even a grey area that is still being decided:

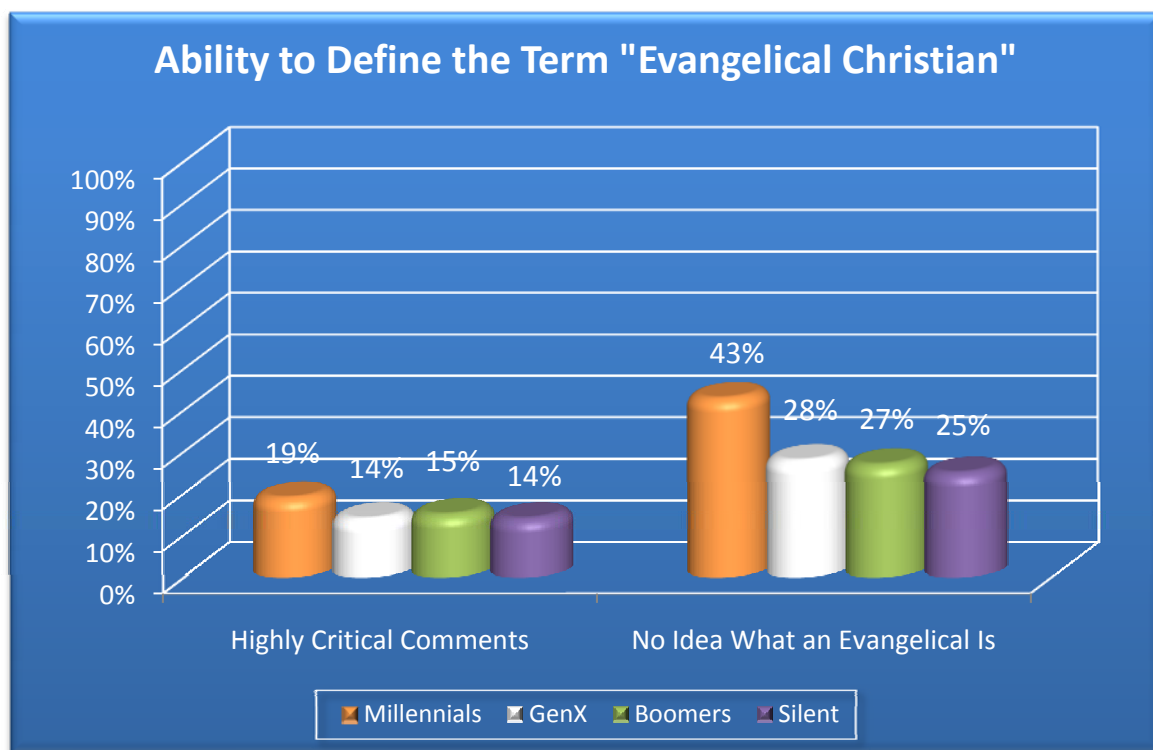
- The display of a copy of the Ten Commandments inside a court building
- The display of a nativity scene on city property
- The display of a scene honoring Islam on city property
- A public school teacher wearing a religious symbol such as a cross or a Star of David during class time
- Voluntary student-led prayers at public school events, such as football games or graduation ceremonies

Although many issues like these and others are still tied up in the courts, and have been restricted in various ways by judicial or government decisions, Millennials are far more likely than other age groups to be of the opinion that they're all perfectly legal. At the same time, they are just as likely (or unlikely) as other age groups to say each of these things *should* be

legal. Millennials simply have less awareness of where religion stands in the public arena today than do other age groups. Their attitudes are about the same as others'; their awareness and knowledge of the situation are much more limited.

Millennials' knowledge and experience levels are consistently where we see the greatest differences from other age groups. In one study, we asked Americans to define the term "evangelical Christian" in their own words. Some people give highly negative definitions (e.g. evangelicals are hypocritical, stupid, fanatical, greedy, hate-filled, etc.), while many more simply say they don't have even the most basic idea of what an evangelical actually is. Others talk about evangelicals' desire to propagate their beliefs, their reliance on the Bible, or other definitions (both fairly accurate and way off base).

Millennials are not more likely than other age groups to lob insults at evangelicals, but they are substantially more likely than other age groups not even to have a clue what an evangelical Christian is. Forty-three percent of Millennials can't hazard even the most basic guess at what an evangelical Christian is, compared to 26% among all other age groups.





ARE CHRISTIANS INVISIBLE TO THEM?

Maybe this lack of familiarity with evangelicalism should not be surprising, given that Millennials are also much less likely than other age groups to have a relationship with people they know to be Christians. There is much talk today about how Millennials are growing up in a far more diverse society than did previous generations. Not only is American society as a whole more diverse, but there is more integration today, and people are more open about diversity (e.g. homosexuals are far less likely to be “closeted” today than they were 30 or 50 or 70 years ago).

However, this more diverse society surrounding Millennials does not always mean their relationships are more diverse. In fact, when it comes to Christianity, the relationships of Millennials are substantially *less* diverse. Consider the fact that in a Grey Matter Research study, only 55% of all Millennials say they currently know someone who is a Christian minister or priest, compared to 73% of older Americans. And just 30% know a Christian clergy person well, compared to 53% of people 30 and older. At the same time, 28% of Millennials said they have *never* personally known a Christian minister or priest, compared to just 10% among older adults.

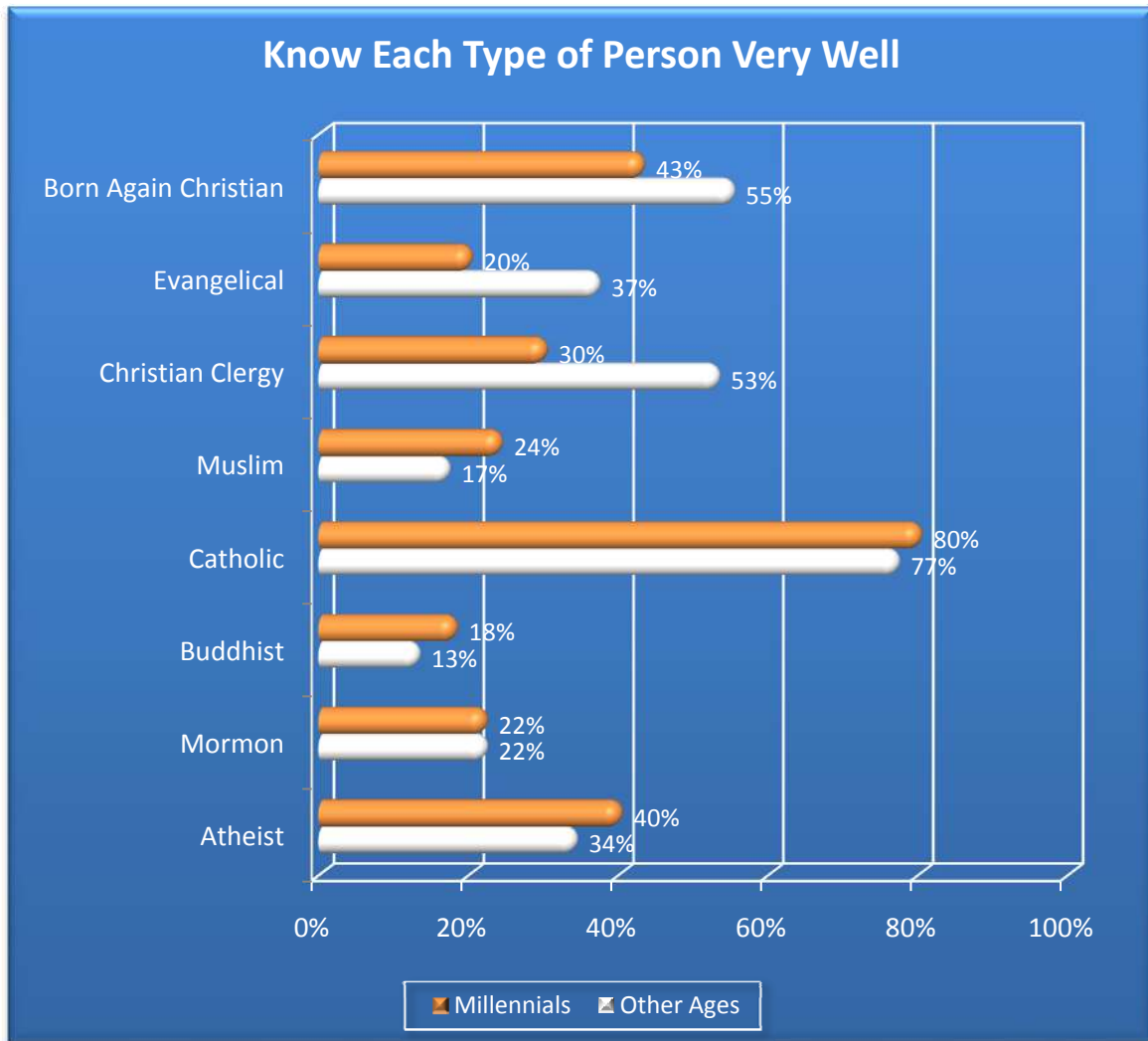
Similarly, just 35% of Millennials say they currently know someone who is an evangelical Christian, which is much lower than among older Americans (51%). Only 20% know an evangelical well, versus 37% among older people. Forty-seven percent of Millennials say they have *never* known an evangelical Christian, which is much higher than the 32% found among people 30 or older.

And while Millennials are as likely as other groups to know someone who is a born-again Christian, the relationships they have with those people are more shallow. Only 43% of Millennials say they know a born again Christian well, compared to 55% of older Americans.

At the same time, Millennials are just as likely as older people to know an atheist, a Mormon, a Buddhist, a Catholic, or a Muslim, and to know each of these kinds of people well, rather than just casually.

And flying in the face of the supposedly diverse relationships they are able to enjoy, Millennials are no more likely than other age cohorts to say they know someone who is American Indian, Black, Hispanic, White, Asian, gay or lesbian, Jewish, or wealthy, or someone who has been homeless, has spent time incarcerated, or was born in a different country. The only group Millennials are more likely than others to know is undocumented immigrants (37% to 28%), and they’re actually less likely than others to know someone who is physically handicapped (69% to 81%). And with most of these types of people, they’re just as likely as other age groups to know someone like this well, rather than just casually.

So, the upshot is that Millennials' relationships are no more diverse than anyone else's, except when it comes to Christian clergy, born again Christians, or evangelical Christians – then they're far less likely than other age groups to know someone of those descriptions well, if at all.



This is particularly ironic, considering the relative size of each population group that is available for Millennials to know. No matter which of the various common definitions of the term “evangelical” one uses, evangelical Christians comprise a population that is considerably larger than Asian-Americans, American Indians, undocumented immigrants, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Mormons, or atheists in the United States. Depending on the definition, evangelicals are also a much larger population than are homosexuals, Hispanics, or African-Americans. Yet comparatively, evangelicals are almost invisible to Millennials.

The strictest definition of “evangelical” shows about 21 million of them in the U.S. out of a total population of about 304 million people. The loosest definition shows about 106 million

evangelicals. Either way, there are a lot of them, yet only 20% of Millennials say they know an evangelical well.

Now, compare this with other population groups. There are an estimated 1.8 million Muslims in the U.S., but 24% of Millennials know a Muslim person well. Evangelical Christians are almost 12 times more common in the U.S. than Muslims, but Millennials are just as likely to know a Muslim very well as they are to know an evangelical Christian. Similarly, there are about 2.1 million American Buddhists, yet 18% of Millennials know one. Keep in mind that Islam and Buddhism are also particularly common in immigrant communities that tend to be more insular and tight-knit, potentially limiting their exposure to the general U.S. population.

And the list goes on. Jews represent about 5.2 million Americans, but 47% of Millennials say they know one well. Mormons represent about 6.1 million Americans, but 22% of Millennials know a Mormon well. The Department of Homeland Security estimates 10.6 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., and many of them live “in the shadows” and speak little to no English – yet Millennials are just as likely to know an undocumented immigrant well as they are to know an evangelical Christian more than casually.

Other groups look like this:

- Homosexuals – an estimated 9 million to 30 million Americans (depending on the study and the definition), yet 52% of Millennials know a gay or lesbian person well
- American Indians – 2.4 million in the U.S., yet 41% of Millennials know one well
- Atheists – 4.9 million in the U.S., yet 40% of Millennials know one well
- African-Americans – 37.6 million in the U.S., yet 69% of Millennials know one well
- Hispanics – 46.9 million in the U.S., yet 71% of Millennials know one well
- Asian-Americans – 13.4 million in the U.S., yet 41% of Millennials know one well

Please note that estimates for some groups are difficult to pin down. For instance, is “homosexual” classified according to self-identification, sexual preferences, or actual sexual experiences? Are bi-sexuals homosexual, or a separate group? Is “Jewish” defined by religious tradition or ethnic tradition? Are evangelicals defined by their beliefs, their actions, what church they attend, or what they call themselves?

Yet regardless of what definitions are used, the result is still clear. At even the strictest definition, there are still 12 times as many evangelicals in the U.S. as there are Muslims, ten times as many as Buddhists, three to four times as many as Mormons, and twice as many as undocumented immigrants – yet all of those groups are as well known to Millennials as are evangelicals. Evangelicals are nine times more common in this country than American Indians, and four times more common than Jews or atheists, yet Millennials are about twice as likely to know a Jew, an atheist, or an American Indian as they are to know an evangelical – and again, that’s at the very strictest definition of “evangelical.” If a less strict definition is used, the disparity is that much greater.



THE BIG QUESTION

We haven't attempted to provide a full length movie with all the details about the next generation's faith landscape, but we have attempted to provide you with a few snapshots that illustrate the way things are going (or given today's young adults, maybe we should call it "a few posts on Flickr").

Millennials are a unique generation in our country's recent history, in that their religious beliefs are fairly typical, yet their knowledge, experience, and willingness to act on or commit seriously to those beliefs lags other generations. They are not antagonistic toward religious faith, but often have a serious apathy or latency related to their faith.

The big question for the faith community, then, is this: What could be the spark that transforms these latent beliefs into an active faith?



ABOUT GREY MATTER RESEARCH

Since 1996, Grey Matter Research has been conducting both qualitative and quantitative research for a wide variety of for-profit and non-profit organizations. Some clients are clearly secular, with no connection to the religious world, some are in the Christian community and

RELIGIOUS CLIENTS WE HAVE SERVED INCLUDE:

- ◆ National Association of Evangelicals
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- ◆ Alliance Defense Fund
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generally would be considered evangelical, and others are in the Christian community but generally not defined as evangelical. Although our clients are highly diverse and our work is very broad-based (financial services, automotive, sports, etc.), one of the areas in which we have specialized is research related to religion.

We have also conducted numerous studies at our own expense to understand the American mindset more thoroughly, often on topics related to religion and society.

Results from our studies have been covered in the international media, such as *Pravda*, *USA Today*, *The Financial Times of London*, *Associated Press*, *MSNBC*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Radio Network*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Clergy Journal*, *Detroit News*, and many other outlets in the USA, China, England, Russia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Korea, Sweden, Hungary, the Philippines, Australia, and other parts of the world.

More information on the company, as well as substantial detail on other research we have done that are available for your use, can be found on our website: www.greymatterresearch.com.

Please contact Ron Sellers at 602-684-6294 for additional information.

FOR-PROFIT CLIENTS WE HAVE SERVED INCLUDE:

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- ◆ Pulte Homes
- ◆ Los Angeles Kings (NHL)
- ◆ Samsung Electronics
- ◆ Goodwill
- ◆ Macy's Department Stores
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- ◆ American Red Cross
- ◆ BMW