

Religious Illiteracy Ignorance a Growing Problem

ROME, APRIL 23, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Religious ignorance, even of the most basic concepts, is on the rise according to some recent studies. In Ireland, once renowned for its Catholicity, a poll revealed that 95% of adolescents could not name the First Commandment.

The poll was carried out on a nationally representative sample of 950 people, by Lansdowne Market Research, for the Iona Institute and the Evangelical Alliance of Ireland. Information on the poll was released by the Iona Institute on April 9.

The results showed that knowledge of Christianity is highest among those over 65 and lowest among those in the 15-24 age group. For example, 77% of the over-65 group could name the authors of the four Gospels, but only 52% of those 15-24 could.

When it came to naming the three persons of the Holy Trinity, 76% of those over 65 got it right, but this dropped to 47% among those aged 15 to 24. Asked how many sacraments there are in the Catholic Church, 63% of the over-65 group correctly answered 7, but only 38% of the 15- to 24-year-olds got it right.

"Some knowledge of Christianity should be part of general knowledge because Ireland has such a deep Christian heritage," commented David Quinn, director of the Iona Institute in the April 9 press release.

"From a Church point of view, there is obviously a correlation between knowledge of the faith, and practice of the faith," he added.

The poll results sparked off a debate over what to do about religious education. John Carr of the Irish National Teachers Organization called for an overhaul of the religious education system, and the introduction of an instruction in specific faiths, reported the Irish Times newspaper April 14.

The article also reported that Brendan O'Reilly, national director of catechetics for the Church, admitted that the current religious education programs, which date back to the 1970s, are in need of review. He said they are working on a new syllabus, due to be completed in about 18 months.

According to another report also published in April, this time in England, one-third of the adult population has no contact with any church, apart from baptisms, weddings and funerals. "Churchgoing in the U.K." was published by Tearfund, an agency working in the field of relief and development. The organization works in partnership with Christian churches.

Half Christian

The report is based on a representative poll of 7,000 adults. In general the report found a split between personal belief and involvement in a church. Many Britons declare themselves Christians, and high percentages of people say they pray with some degree of regularity. Yet, this does not translate into a regular religious practice in terms of participating in a church.

Among the highlights are the following points.

-- Christianity is the predominant faith in the United Kingdom with 53% of adults claiming to be Christian. Other faiths account for 6%, and 39% claim to have no religion.

-- Figures for those who actively practice are lower, with 7.6 million, 15% of the adult population, attending church monthly. This includes 4.9 million who go weekly. If what the report terms "fringe and occasional churchgoers" -- 5 million adults -- are added, then 26% of adults in the United Kingdom go to church at least once a year.

-- On a regional level, among those who attend on at least a monthly basis Northern Ireland had the highest level of regular churchgoers, at 45% of adults. Then there is a big drop to the next-highest, Scotland, coming in at 18%. England follows, with 14% and Wales is last, with 12%.

-- In England, the city of London stands out, with 20% of the adult population being regular churchgoers.

-- Two-thirds of adults in the United Kingdom, 32.2 million people, have no connection with church at present, or with another religion. This group is evenly divided between those who have been in the past but have since left -- 16 million -- and those who have never been in their lives -- 16.2 million.

"This secular majority presents a major challenge to churches," the report comments. Of this group the study found that the great majority, 29.3 million, "are unreceptive and closed to attending church; churchgoing is simply not on their agenda."

This challenge is also set to increase over time. Older people are more likely to belong to the Christian faith. Three-fourths of those 65-74, and 82% of those over 75 are Christians, compared with an average 53%. Only one-third of those 16-34 are Christian, and for those aged under 45 the nonreligious outnumber Christians. Regular churchgoing plummets to only 10% of those 16-24.

The report did, however, reveal that there are opportunities for the churches, if only they can work out how to reach those who are open to participating. Based on the poll results, among adults who have no experience of church attendance, there are 600,000 who are open to going in future. While of the group who have left a church there is a sizable number, 2.3 million, who are also prepared to return in the future.

Faith formation

The United States also came in for a critical look at the state of religion with the publication in March of the book "Religious Literacy" by Boston University professor Stephen Prothero. In general, he says, Americans have a higher level of church attendance than in other Western countries. Nevertheless, they do not fare so well when it comes to religious knowledge.

The book cites a number of polls and other material revealing similar findings to those discovered in Ireland. Thus, while 20 million bibles a year are sold in the United States, many people are unable to name the authors of the Gospels or one of the apostles.

Similarly, they run into difficulties when asked to list at least five of the Ten Commandments. Ignorance is even more prevalent when people are asked about any of the non-Christian religions.

Prothero warns that religious illiteracy is more dangerous than other forms of ignorance, given religion's important role in culture and as a force in the world. Whether we want to understand the past, or contemporary debates ranging from bioethics to foreign policy, we need to have some knowledge of religion.

Religion, Prothero argues, will be one of the "key identity markers," of the 21st century.

In a nutshell: You need religious literacy in order to be an effective citizen.

When it comes to identifying the causes of religious illiteracy, Prothero attributes it to a variety of causes. In academic circles, the culture tends to be persistently skeptical of religion, so both textbooks and classes tend to ignore religion, thus leaving students ignorant of religion's role.

Churches too have played a part. Religious education in recent decades in many of the Christian denominations has left a lot to be desired, favoring the touchy-feely over imparting a solid knowledge of the Bible and doctrine. Parents also come in for criticism from Prothero, for not instructing their children sufficiently in religion.

One of the ways to overcome religious illiteracy, Prothero recommends, is to focus on secondary schools and colleges. Teaching religion in public schools should not be seen as breaching the Church-state divide. This teaching would be of a civic, not moral, nature, in order to ensure a basic education in Christianity and major world religions.

For those who have already finished school, then he urges them to see the attainment of religious knowledge both as a personal challenge and a civic duty. Recommendations that one can only hope will not fall on deaf ears.

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