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RESURRECTING THE DEAD IN AMERICA

by
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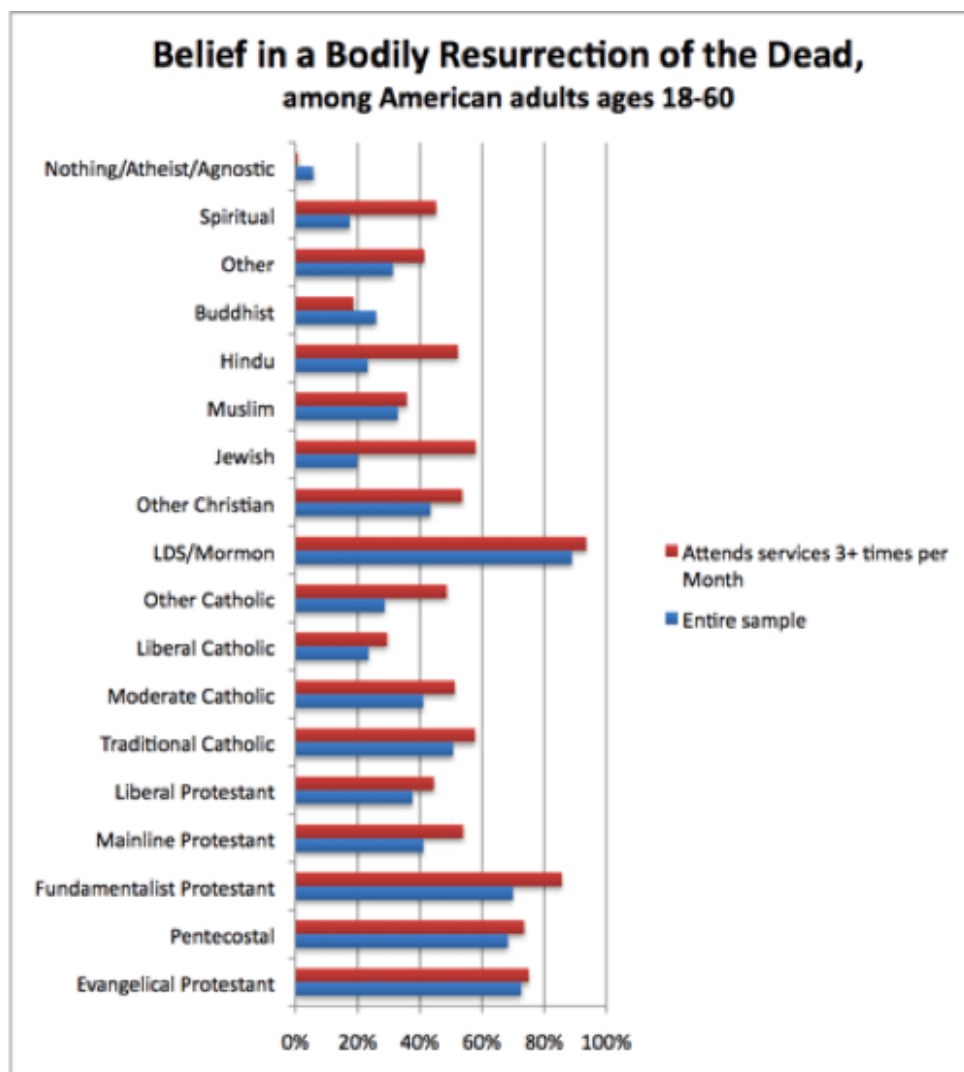
Many Christians regularly recite the Apostle's or Nicene Creed, recounting aloud beliefs they hold to be foundational. With the share of our neighbors that self-identify as agnostic, atheist, or simply “not religious” rising, repeating such creeds is an opportunity for Christians to reflect on just how odd some of our faith assertions really are. Admit it—there's some strange stuff in there. Too strange, it turns out, for many of our peers, including some of the faithful.

In my monthly FIRST THINGS contribution, I will lean heavily on a new source of information on American religious and family life called the *Relationships in America* project. It's a large data collection effort which gathered information from 15,738 Americans ages eighteen to sixty. GfK, formerly Knowledge Networks, fielded the survey earlier this year using their nationally representative panel of adults. Its size enables us to slice the pie more narrowly than is typical when it comes to religious affiliations. Instead of bemoaning that there are too few Mormons or Muslims or churchgoing evangelicals or mainline Protestants in the data to make any claims about them, we can do exactly that.

It asks respondents about a wide variety of human-interest topics, from their participation in religious services and religious beliefs, to questions about their attitudes regarding marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and other family forms, to specifics about sexual behavior and experience of

abuse and domestic violence. A much wider report of results from the *Relationships in America* survey project is due out in late October from the [Austin Institute](#).

A friend of mine was interested in Christian beliefs about death and the resurrection, so I added a few questions to the survey about exactly that. Since not everyone knows what *resurrection* means, I spelled it out and placed the question alongside other measures of traditional religiosity. This way, I hoped, nobody would mistake the resurrection of the dead for a near-death experience or the “zombie apocalypse.” (The things you have to anticipate today.) So after asking respondents about life after death and about heaven and hell, we asked them, “Do you think there will be a bodily resurrection, that is, where the bodies of deceased persons will rise again?”



A general resurrection of the dead is something orthodox Christians across the centuries have long anticipated. And it's one of those chunks of Christian dogma that must seem unbelievable to a genuine outsider (think second-generation secularist). Our dead bodies will return to dirt, or become fish food, or burnt up, and yet from such dust we will be reconstituted in the flesh—just as Job (19:26) claimed—by our Maker at some appointed future day and hour. Right?

Many of the faithful aren't so sure. Since pastors and priests are quick to remind me that Christians who aren't active in their congregations may think all manner of things, I distinguish between "everyone" and active parishioners, defined here as people who attend services at least three times a month. Overall, 37 percent of Americans believe there will be a bodily resurrection of the dead, compared to 72 percent who express a positive belief that there is life after death.

While most Americans reject a bodily resurrection, solid majorities of many major religious groups affirm it. Belief in the resurrection is highest among the Latter Day Saints, self-identified fundamentalist Protestants, evangelical Protestants, and Pentecostals. Among their churchgoing populations, support for it runs at 94, 86, 75, and 74 percent, respectively. But active attendance doesn't seem to matter a great deal here—a few percentage points.

Since the survey did not interview people over time—ideally, decades—I'm not in a position to make claims about where things are headed. But I know a few evangelical and Pentecostal pastors who'd worry that one in four people in church on most Sundays wasn't on board with the resurrection, a biblical reality reflected in the teachings of our Lord, of St. Paul, and the early Church.

It's worse, however, among Roman Catholics, who are notably less apt to believe in the resurrection of the dead. Self-identified "traditional" Catholics are predictably the most supportive, at 58 percent among regular Mass attenders. Moderates are more skeptical (at 41 percent overall), and self-identified "liberal" Catholics are largely pessimistic. Even among those who attend Mass regularly, only 30 percent affirmed a future resurrection.

Mainline Protestants trail traditional Catholics here slightly, at 41 percent overall and 54 percent among the most faithful attenders. Note the distinction here between all mainliners and those who attend—it's 13 percentage points, meaning that involvement is a pivotal predictor of belief among them. The same is true among Jews and the amorphous “spiritual but not religious” crowd: among each of these belief in the resurrection jumps notably—to 58 and 45 percent, respectively—when the sample is limited to the religiously active among them.

What to make of this? The good news is that solid majorities of major Christian groups still affirm what is a rather extraordinary, unempirical idea. Given that only 18 percent of American adults say they're *more* active in organized religion today than they were ten years ago, while 32 percent said they're *less* active, perhaps religious leaders should take some comfort in the data here. And yet knowing them, they probably won't. They'll see, as do I, the telltale signs of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” the erosion of a doctrine down into a generalized, amorphous version of itself. After all, “Good people go to heaven after they die” is one of the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism that sociologist Christian Smith identified in his omnibus study of religious youth in America (*Soul Searching*).

Perhaps today the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is simply too particular, too specific, too . . . biblical.

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