

Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith

Does Faith Matter? Leaders on the Role of Faith in Society

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Preface



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The religious and cultural landscape has shifted significantly over recent decades. In some societies, traditional religious institutions are more marginalized and separated from public life, with a growing number of people saying they have no religious affiliation. Yet more than eight in ten people worldwide still identify with a religion¹. In many societies, recognition of the role played by faith and religious culture in public life is increasing. In these contexts, faith groups exercise influence, build social capital and provide services, advocate for change and mobilize communities for positive and useful action.

Hardly a day goes by without religion being in the news. The nature of the media is such that most of that coverage focuses on strife and extremism, but beneath the surface of negativity is a deep ocean of creative thought and action by faith groups dedicated to making the world a better place. Moved by a view of how a better world should be, by the appeal to love and justice in various holy writings, and by the example of selfless religious leaders throughout history and in the modern era, people of faith will continue to shape the way societies and individuals are organized around the world. Those who choose to ignore this will miss a vital component as they try to understand the society in which they operate. Faith and religious observance, at their best, are triggers of social progress. They drive development and stabilize political systems.

The World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith is investigating some of the ways in which faith and spirituality play a positive role in society. It celebrates and promotes faith-based dialogue in the public and private spheres.

In 2013, the Council developed an online survey for global leaders and executives to help us reflect on the significance of faith in society. The survey asked questions about issues, problems and geographic areas where faith does, or can, play a helpful role, and posed key questions about attitudes, beliefs and perceptions in regard to religious belief. In sharing the results of this survey, the Council hopes to cast a different light on the place religious belief holds in public life, and renew our collective understanding of religion in today's society.

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

About the Survey

The survey is part of a sustained effort through 2013 and 2014 by the Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith to gather and analyse the views on faith and religion of leaders from different walks of life and geographical contexts. It questions members of the Network of Global Agenda Councils about their views on the role of faith, spirituality and religion within the global environment.

The survey was conducted over a 10-month period, from April 2013 to January 2014. It comprised 14 questions and an open section for comments, concerns and views. Several survey questions were based upon the World Values Survey² and the General Social Survey³, to allow for comparisons and a deeper level of analysis.

All respondents were anonymous and recruited to participate through various social media platforms available to the Network. In total, 86 people participated in the survey, which was distributed across various geographies: 39% were from North America; 31% European; 10% from the Middle East/North Africa; 10% from Asia; 5% from Latin America. This means that primary input from survey respondents has come from the Western world.

The extreme limitations of online surveys are acknowledged: the respondent sample is normally not representative of the overall target group and these surveys can be no more than indicative. While a self-selection bias on the part of respondents is expected, the presented results are still believed to be relevant in consideration of the novelty and unique nature of perspectives that they bring to the debate on the role of faith in society. More rigorous work is suggested to take place to test these results against other reliable measures.

For the sake of this survey, it has been intentionally agreed not to make a specific distinction between the terms “faith” (belief system) and “religion” (organized rites and rituals), leaving it to individual respondents to loosely interpret the terms according to their own knowledge and understanding.

² World Values Survey (WVS) [online], <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>, accessed in January 2013.

³ The General Social Survey (GSS) [online], <http://www3.norc.ox.ac.uk/gss+website/>, accessed in January 2013.

Key Findings

1. Religious Identification

Belief in god or some form of higher power is widespread. Faith and spiritual beliefs persist in today's society and individuals show a personal and intellectual openness to god and other forms of moral power transcending the material world.

When asked about their belief in god or some higher power, **43% of respondents said god definitely exists and 18% believe god probably exists (for a total of 61%)**. This represents a large percentage, approximately two-thirds of the respondents. Conversely, 18% believe there is probably no god and 15% are certain there is no god (for a total of 32%).

Regarding religious and spiritual identification, 36% identified themselves as a spiritual person; 13% identified as religious; 13% indicated they are both spiritual and religious (for a total of 62%) and 28% said they are neither spiritual nor religious. Numbers tell us that some of the respondents who believe there is probably no god or are certain there is no god, still consider themselves to be spiritual or religious.

However, when asked to classify their religious/spiritual identification independently of whether or not they go to a church, temple, synagogue or mosque, a total of 20% considered themselves religious, 7% more than previously. Additionally, 33% identified themselves as a spiritual person, 23% indicated they are not religious, 14% identified as a convinced atheist, and 11% indicated "don't know" or other.

2. Religious and Spiritual Commitments and Practices

It is more about belief than practice. A belief in god or a higher power of some kind is not necessarily accompanied by a solid commitment to strict religious praxis. Some form of religious or spiritual activity does take place in the private sphere, but the nature and frequency of it is mainly determined by individual choice rather than dogmatic principles.

When asked how important religious or spiritual commitments were to their way of life, respondents' answers were highly polarized. On a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important), 21% answered not important at all, followed by 20% who answered very important and 19% who answered still important. **Analysis of the full data set showed that nearly equal amounts of people say that faith, or lack thereof, significantly affects their way of life. Only a few seem to be neutral in this regard.**

When it comes to commitment to a particular religious faith, 22% indicated a very strong commitment and 22% indicated somewhat strong, for a total of 44%, in contrast to the 62% that consider themselves religious or spiritual. These figures show that not all individuals who are engaged with some form of religious or spiritual activity relate their religious or spiritual belief system to structured commitments and obligations.

The fact that so few people are highly committed to religious faith is reflected in the following responses regarding religious practices. Only 19% of respondents said that in the last year they had fasted or made a personal sacrifice as an expression of their faith compared to the vast majority - 81% - who said they had not. Forty-four percent of respondents reported that in the last year they had never attended a religious service other than for special occasions, and only 11% attended a service at least once a week. To add to this picture, when asked how often they engaged in spiritual activity such as prayer, meditation and other forms of worship, 35% of respondents reported they did at least once a week.

Finally, **the most popular religious / spiritual activity appears to be engaging with books, articles, the web or other material**. Only 21% of respondents reported that they never did such a thing. The two most common responses, representing 26% of the respondents respectively, were "at least once a week" and "a few times a week", followed by 19% "at least once a month" and 8% "at least once a year."

Data show a desire by many people to live their faith in a more spiritual and less orthodox way, and to rely on individual choice when it comes to preferred forms of worship.

3. Attitudes toward Faith

Faith plays a positive role in global affairs. It is considered to be a constructive force for good and can have a positive influence in promoting social change.

When respondents were asked – using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) – whether they believed that faith is generally a force for good, the most frequent response (25%) was "somewhat a force for good". However, 29% answered "very much" and only 19% answered "not at all."

More than half of the respondents believed that faith can have a positive influence in global affairs.

When diving deeper into specific topics, the following results were found:

Faith plays a crucial role in issues related to:

- Human Rights
- Peace-making
- Values

Faith's role is considered high in issues related to:

- Anti-corruption
- Business Ethics
- Civil Society

Faith is seen as somewhat important in issues related to:

- Informed Society
- Climate Change
- Sustainability
- Population Growth

A strong split in responses is registered concerning the role of faith in issues of conflict prevention. Respondents were highly polarized on this topic: slightly more than half believed that faith could not be a positive force for preventing conflict, while slightly less than half believed that faith could play a very important role in conflict prevention. These results depict a very interesting scenario where faith is not identified as a constructive conflict-prevention force, while being seen as a key factor for conflict resolution and peace making. This response highlights the controversial duality of the perceived role of faith and religion when it comes to conflict and security: religion is certainly part of the problem, but can also be leveraged as a powerful tool for achieving peaceful solutions and agreements. In other words, faith and religion can be both positive and negative forces in issues of political stability and security at regional and national level.

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