

# 5 Reasons Christians Are Increasingly Labeled 'Extremists'

Society is undergoing a change of mind about the way religion and people of faith intersect with public life. That is, there are intensifying perceptions that faith is at the root of a vast number of societal ills.

Though it remains the nation's most dominant religion, Christianity faces significant headwind in the court of public opinion. The decades-old trend that Christianity is irrelevant is increasingly giving way to the notion that Christianity is bad for society.

A new major study conducted by Barna Group, and explored in the new book *Good Faith*, co-authored by Barna president David Kinnaman, examines society's current perceptions of faith and Christianity. In sum, faith and religion and Christianity are viewed by millions of adults to be extremist.

Here are five facts that explain the emerging reality:

## **1. Adults and especially non-believers are concerned about religious extremism.**

In the wake of religiously motivated terrorism—like the recent incidents in San Bernardino and Paris—it is no wonder that a backlash against extremism is reaching a boiling point. Currently, a strong majority of adults believe “being religiously extreme is a threat to society.” Three-quarters of all Americans—and nine out of ten Americans with no faith affiliation—agree with this statement.

## **2. Nearly half of non-religious adults perceive Christianity to be extremist.**

The perception that the Christian faith is extreme is now firmly entrenched among the nation's non-Christians. A full forty-five percent of atheists, agnostics, and religiously unaffiliated in America agree with the statement "Christianity is extremist." Almost as troubling is the fact that only 14 percent of atheists and agnostics strongly disagree that Christianity is extremist. The remaining four in ten (41%) disagree only somewhat. So even non-Christians who are reluctant to fully label Christianity as extremist, still harbor some hesitations and negative perceptions toward the religion.

### **3. The range of what constitutes extremism is broad, ranging from behaviors that are almost universally condemned to more narrowly defined extremism.**

What actions and beliefs, exactly, come to mind when people think about religious extremism? The researchers examined more than 20 different activities and beliefs, asking a random, representative sample of U.S. adults to identify the degree to which each of those activities appeared extreme. The results essentially fall into four categories:

- **Category 1** included those actions widely considered to be extreme by at least four in five adults in the U.S. This involved using religion to justify violence, refusing standard medical care for children, and refusing to serve a customer whose lifestyle conflicted with their beliefs. For the most part, these three elements were viewed to be extreme by a majority of all demographic segments as well.
- **Category 2** were activities and beliefs marked as extremist by at least half, but less than 80% of the public. Eight different factors qualified for this level, ranging from demonstrating outside an organization they consider immoral and protesting government policies that conflict with religious views. Many of these factors related to the claims of faith in

the public square—that is, how religious people might interact on social issues and government policies.

- **Category 3** included factors that generated extremist concerns among at least one out of five adults, though they are not currently rated as extreme by more than 50% of adults. This group of concerns was populated by elements that are more distinctive to various religious traditions, such as speaking in tongues (characteristic of Pentecostal and charismatic believers), wearing special clothes or head coverings (e.g., Muslim women), and adhering to special dietary restrictions (such as Mormons, Catholics, Jews, and Adventists). [Note: specific religious connections were not provided to respondents.]
- **Category 4** was only occasionally indicated as extremist, generating concerns among at least one in 16 adults, but fewer than one-fifth of Americans. However, when calculated on the basis of the entire population, these perceptions represent significant numbers of adults who indicate anxiety about these kinds of religious expression. These factors include reading sacred literature (either the Bible or Koran) in public as well as donating money to or attending a religious institution. Again, these are low on the list of extremism, however, for many Americans even these conventional activities are viewed to be extreme.

## **5. Evangelicals stand out from the norm in terms of their attitudes on religious extremism—and they exhibit major differences from the skeptics.**

Evangelical Christians stand out among national trends. In all but four cases, evangelicals are much less likely to perceive the elements assessed in the research to constitute extremism. Evangelicals are equally likely as the general population to say that religiously motivated violence and refusing medical attention to children are extremist—in other words, the vast

majority of evangelicals agree with virtually everyone that these activities are certainly extreme. Also, evangelicals are equally likely as the general population to say that wearing special clothes or head garments and reading the Koran in public are extremist actions.

[Note: Barna's definition of evangelicals is not based upon a person self-identifying as evangelical. See the methodology below for details. As Barna defines them, evangelicals represent 7% of the population or about one in every 14 adults.]

The research points out a massive gap between two "super segments" in American life today: evangelicals and skeptics (those who self-identify as atheist, agnostic and religiously unaffiliated).

On virtually all of the extremist factors assessed in the research, evangelicals and skeptics maintain widely divergent points of view. For example, only 1% of evangelicals believe it is religiously extreme for a person to teach his or her children that same-sex relationships are morally wrong. However, three-quarters of skeptics (75%) believe this is extremist. Attempting to convert others generates a perception gap of 10% to 83% between evangelicals and skeptics, an incredible 73 percentage points.

### **What The Research Means**

David Kinnaman, who is the president of Barna and directed the research study on religious extremism, comments that "These gaps show the challenges practicing Christians and especially evangelicals are facing. In a religiously plural and divisive society, various "tribes"—ranging from faithful to skeptic—are vying to decide how faith should work. The most contentious issues are the ways in which religious conviction gets expressed publicly, but the findings illustrate that a wide range of actions, even beliefs, are now viewed as extremist by

large chunks of the population.”

“The research starkly demonstrates the ways in which evangelicals and many practicing Catholics are out of the cultural mainstream. In fact, skeptics and religiously unaffiliated are now much closer to the cultural ‘norm’ than are religious conservatives. In other words, the secular point of view, which says faith should be kept out of the public domain, is much closer to the mainstream in U.S. life.

“This fact explains why millions of devout Christians are experiencing such frustration and concern. They are feeling out of step with social norms and the cultural momentum. This is most significantly felt when it comes to social views, such as evangelicals’ convictions on same-sex relationships. However, the perception of ‘social extremism’ also applies to many other beliefs and practices, including personal evangelism and missions work.”

On March 1, Kinnaman releases a new book *Good Faith* that analyzes the new “social extremism” that characterizes the current faith landscape. Teaming up again with Gabe Lyons, the co-author of *unChristian*, the book explores cultural trends that are creating obstacles and opportunities for Christians. “*UnChristian* examined the negative perceptions of young non-Christians,” says Kinnaman. “And now, nearly a decade later, *Good Faith* continues that work by helping to explore how Christians can be biblically countercultural in a society that is increasingly unfriendly to faith.”

Those interested in more about the *Good Faith* project can attend one of the free nationwide events, featuring Kinnaman and Lyons.

*This article originally appeared on .*