

GENERATION Y: INFORMALLY RELIGIOUS, SOCIALLY PROGRESSIVE, AND CIVICALLY ENGAGED

BY BRENT ELROD

In a nationwide survey, 18-25 year olds from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and religious affiliations, including youth who do not identify themselves with a religion, overwhelmingly demonstrated their openness to religious diversity. Clear majorities also expressed more liberal political views than older generations on issues such as gay marriage and legal abortion. Additionally, a majority of respondents reported participating in some kind of community service and volunteer activity within the past year.

The survey—conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and sponsored by Reboot and funded partially by CIRCLE—reached 1,385 youth respondents, and included over-samples of Muslim, Jewish, Asian, African-American, and Hispanic youth. For full survey results, see “OMG! How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era,” which can be downloaded from http://www.civicyouth.org/research/areas/youth_attit.htm.

GENERATION Y IS INFORMALLY RELIGIOUS AND OPEN TO RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

To help clarify how religion fits into young people’s lives, Reboot grouped its respondents into three categories: those for whom religion is a central part of their lives (“The Godly” 27 percent), those for whom religion plays little role, although they may have spiritual aspects to their identity (“The God-less” 27 percent), and those who are “uncertain, yet positive” about their religious identities and lean toward informal and expressive practices (“The Undecided Middle” 46 percent).

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For “The Godly” and “The Undecided Middle,” overwhelming majorities say that they have an informal religious attachment that is both communal (where they interact with others outside of the institutional setting, e.g., talking with friends about their religion) and individualistic (e.g., praying before meals, reading religious materials, etc.). And, when forced to characterize the nature of their religious attachment, a plurality of young people call themselves “religious” (44 percent), but a majority describe themselves

as either “spiritual but not religious” (35 percent) or “neither spiritual nor religious” (18 percent). Across the three groups, most young people report that at least a few of their friends identify with a different religion, and a majority feels that their own personal identity is not primarily defined by a formal religion. In fact, many respondents cannot identify what faith tradition or denomination they belong to, and 23 percent do not identify with any denomination at all.

GENERATION Y IS ETHNICALLY DIVERSE, SOCIALLY PROGRESSIVE, AND CIVICALLY ENGAGED

Based on responses to Reboot’s survey, Generation Y is the most ethnically diverse—and the most open to such diversity—of any living generation. Compared to the 84 percent of Americans older than 65 years who identify themselves as white, only 61 percent of Generation Y respondents call themselves white.

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Generation Y also holds more progressive views on a number of “moral” issues. Overall, a majority of respondents (54 percent) favor rights for gays and lesbians to get married legally and nearly two-thirds (64 percent) support legal abortion. Furthermore, this generation embraces the concept of immigration, with 84 percent agreeing that immigrants share American values of democracy and freedom.

In addition, Generation Y demonstrates an interest in volunteering and contributing to civic life. Overall, 56 percent of respondents report participating in some kind of volunteer activity or community service within the last year, and volunteering with a civic or a community organization actually ranks above other forms of participation in religious, cultural, or academic life (such as sports teams, theater, etc.). However, while religious youth are far more likely to report that they volunteer on a regular basis, for the most part, Generation Y only volunteers “every once in a while.” *