

Most Americans Consider Easter a Religious Holiday, but Fewer Correctly Identify its Meaning



March 15, 2010 - As American society becomes more religiously diverse, the nation's population has had to grapple with how to define its holidays and celebrations.

A recent study by the Barna Group explored Americans' definition of the Easter holiday, asking a nationwide, representative sample of American adults how they would describe what Easter means to them, personally.

The results indicated that most Americans consider Easter to be a religious holiday, but fewer identify the resurrection of Jesus as the underlying meaning. The study also explored the degree to which Americans are likely to invite an unchurched friend or family member to attend worship service on Easter weekend.

Sacred Descriptions

In response to a free-response query, most Americans described Easter as a religious celebration. Two out of every three Americans (67%) mention some type of theistic religious element. Common responses included describing it as a Christian holiday, a celebration of God or Jesus, a celebration of Passover, a holy day, or a special time for church or worship attendance.

However, while a majority of Americans indicated some type of spiritual connection with Easter, the research also showed that a minority of adults directly linked Easter to the Christian faith's belief in the resurrection of Christ. In all, 42% of Americans said that the meaning of Easter was the resurrection of Jesus or that it signifies Christ death and return to life. One out of every 50 adults (2%) said that they would describe Easter as the most important holiday of their faith.

Even within the religious definitions offered by Americans there is a certain degree of confusion: 2% of Americans said that Easter is about the "birth of Christ"; another 2% indicated it was about the "rebirth of Jesus"; and 1% said it is a celebration of "the second coming of Jesus." Not included in the theistic category was another 3% who described Easter as a celebration of spring or a pagan holiday.

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Secular Descriptions

On the non-religious side, 13% of respondents said they were not sure how to describe Easter. Another 8% of Americans said the holiday means nothing to them or that they do not celebrate the occasion. Other non-religious descriptions of Easter included: getting friends and family together (4%), spring break (3%), a symbol of new beginnings, rebirth, and renewal (2%), a time to dye and hide eggs (2%), an event for children to have fun (2%), the Easter bunny (1%), an occasion that is too commercialized (1%), and an opportunity to enjoy food and candy (1%).

Who Celebrates Easter as Religious Holiday?

The types of Americans who were most likely to express some type of theistic religious connection with Easter were evangelicals (93%), attenders of large churches (86% among those whose congregation has 500-plus adult attenders), born again Christians (81%), and weekly churchgoers (77%).

Republicans (77%) and Democrats (71%) were more likely than were independents (59%) and non-registered citizens (51%) to say Easter has religious meaning for them.

In terms of age, members of the Boomer generation (73%, ages 45 to 63) were among the most likely to describe Easter as a religious holiday for them, compared with two-thirds of Elders (66% of those ages 64-plus) and Busters (66%, ages 26 to 44). The youngest adult generation, the Mosaics (ages 18 to 25), were the least

likely age segment to say Easter is a religious holiday (58%), reflecting the increasingly secular mindset of young adults.

Other population segments describing Easter with a non-religious bent were faith groups other than Christianity (just 31% said Easter's meaning is religious), atheists and agnostics (36%), and unchurched adults (46%).

Resurrection Views

Those who identify Easter explicitly as a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus were most likely to be evangelicals (73%), large church attenders (60%), born again Christians (55%), active churchgoers (54%), upscale adults (54%), and Protestants (51%).

Showing a perceptual gap between political conservatives and liberals, those on the political "right" were nearly twice as likely as those on the political "left" to say that Easter is a celebration of the resurrection (53% versus 29%, respectively).

In terms of the audience that most Christian churches attempt to attract on Easter weekend – non-churchgoing adults – the research shows that while 46% of unchurched adults view the meaning of Easter to be religious, while just 25% connect the holiday to Jesus' return to life.

As for denominational affiliation, most Catholics said they celebrate Easter as a religious holiday (65%). Still, just one-third of Catholics listed the resurrection as the meaning of the holiday (37%). In comparison, Protestants were more likely than Catholics both to view Easter as a religious holiday and to connect the occasion to Jesus' awakening from death (78% and 51%, respectively).

Easter and Evangelism?

The Barna research also examined whether churchgoing adults perceive Easter weekend to be a good time to invite people to attend worship services with them. While most active churchgoers said they would be open to doing this, a minority said they would be likely to do so. Overall, 31% of active churchgoers said they would definitely invite someone they know who does not usually attend a church to accompany them to a church service on Easter weekend this year.

Those most likely to invite people to church on Easter were women, parents of young children, evangelicals, Protestants, those who attend small churches (less than 100 adult attenders), and non-white adults.

Interestingly, those who articulate a resurrection-related concept of Easter are no more likely than other religiously oriented Americans to indicate that they will invite friends to worship with them on Easter.

Observations

The Barna researcher who directed the project, David Kinnaman, pointed out that "most Americans continue to view the Easter holiday as a religious celebration, but many of them..."

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