Trust in the church as an institution: A comparative longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

In one of the most revealing studies of its kind, the Barna Group reported in 2014 that 59% of Millennials who grew up attending church no longer do so. The same study cited that regardless of generation or denomination, 40% reported that they find God elsewhere other than the institution of church and 35% said that church is not relevant to them. To add more fuel to the fire, 35% of Millennials actually had an anti-church stance, in that they saw the institution of church doing more harm than good. (Barna, 2014)

Perhaps even more telling is that since the Barna study was conducted in 2013 and published in 2014, the rate of flight from established, traditional church institutions has only increased (Gallup, 2018; LifeWay Research, 2018). The most recent Gallup numbers, as reported by Gallup senior researcher, Frank Newport (2018), indicate that institutional religious attendance among the three largest religious groups, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, have continued a steady decline since the 1950’s. A similar decline was reported in another Gallup survey among American Catholics (Saad, 2018). Yet among these reports are also recent indicators that many of those young adults not attending a Christian church, still adhere to the label of being “Christian”. These indicators continue to spur religious leaders to explore the apparent disconnect between personal belief and the religious institution. The apparent rejection of the institution may not line up with personal identification of the ideology it represents.

Andy Crouch provides a unique look at the role of institution, particularly in the U.S. in his book, Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power (2013), he actively discusses the role of institution as a sociological term “given to any deeply and persistently organized pattern of human behavior.” (pg. 169) complete with the artifact that represents...
the institution as a key indicator of any culture. “A football”, according to Crouch, is a cultural artifact, but football as a sport is a rich and complex system of behaviors, beliefs, patterns, and possibilities that can be handed on from one generation to the next and therefore is indicative of the culture in which it resides. He goes on to reason that institutions, then, represent the context in which the most significant of shared human experience can take place within and across national cultures, therefore also shaping culture (Crouch, 2013).

The game of football—the institution—is an opportunity for the kinds of image bearing that would be impossible in a world without it. When a quarterback spots an open wide receiver far down the field and throws a perfectly targeted pass, we jump out of our seats and cheer (or, if we’re rooting for the other team, shake our heads in resigned admiration) (Crouch, 2013, pg. 170).

So, what happens when the religious institution of church, synagogue, or mosque seems to no longer hold a relevant role in drawing together adherents as an accepted “image bearer”? The decline in traditional religious institution attendance could provide a clarifying snapshot of a potentially significant shift in broader cultural views and norms with which the religious institution has not kept up in teaching or practice as its adherents’ views have shifted.

Impact on Society
A practical view of the criticality of the apparent trends is to examine what might be lost when the church’s influence is diminished within a population. Generally, how does the church support society and what would happen if this support is diminished or eliminated? Much has been said about the consequences of a diminished influence of God in society. Little has been said about a significant body of research that discusses the interaction between religion and health, both physiological and psychological (Ellison and Levin 1998; Levin 1996). The concise view of these studies is that people who are committed to a faith experience better physical and mental health than people who are not religious. When the cost to society of poor physical and mental health is measured, a crisis situation becomes clearer. Studies by Ellison and Levin suggest that religious people tend to receive more social support than non-religious people. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between social support and wellbeing (Bradley 1995; Ellison & George 1994; House, Umberson, & Landis 1988; Kahn 1994). These relationships may be ignored by secular sources as they do not fit the biases that exist within the narrative promulgated in secular literature and the media. Furthermore, religious sources of information have been constrained to specific populations over short time frames.

The assumption that social interaction is always positive should also be challenged. Negative interaction, while not pleasant, can also be harmful (Rook, 1984). Relationships may include scenarios where the other party is needlessly critical, disrespectful, demanding, guilt driven, dependent, condescending, and burdensome. This is a partial list to create a context. Churches can often host relationships that are harmful to the individuals involved causing a net negative effect on psychological wellbeing (Finch, Okun, Barrera, Zautra, & Reich, 1989; Pagel, Erdly, & Becker, 1987; Rook, 1984).

While the church has given attention to congregational disputes regarding decisions made, policy created, or theological options, there has not been much attention given to physical or psychological wellbeing. Could this be a driver for disinterest in the church as an institution? Is there an ‘irrelevancy’ aspect to the current function? Has something taken the church’s place? A parishioner can simply look at their church and decide if it is relevant given the current societal pressures to perform and provide. While churches are in an ideal position to help with both physiological and psychological health, they are typically ill-equipped, incapable, or disinterested, to the detriment of the ‘body’.

The Data
To explore the trends across a significant time frame, data from the World Values Survey was used in this study. The results were drawn from groups during waves of studies. Each wave is released separately, however, in this longitudinal study the trends within religious groups are seen over multiple waves. This unique view allows for much greater visibility into the trends over time. The World Values Survey is the world’s only major longitudinal cultural study using nearly 100 countries encompassing about 90 percent of the global population utilizing the same questions to all. The study uses 400,000 respondents and covers the major demographic variation including all genders, age groups, and income levels. The World Values Survey strives to help researchers and policy makers better understand regional and global attitudes on religion, equality, gender, politics, and well-being.
The World Values Survey also avoids grouping results in pre-distinguished categories such as cultural dimensions which allows for better analysis of the data. Several key aspects of the study are now explained.

Longitudinal aspect. Culture changes slowly, often generationally necessitating using data that spans decades. The World Values Survey has been conducted six times since 1981 with a seventh wave commencing between 2017-2019. Our data covers the first six waves of the World Values Survey from 1981 – 2014 encompassing 33 years of data. Wave seven was not completed as of the writing of this paper.

Cohorts. The World Values Survey offers a breadth and depth of research data allowing us to look at groups by age and by region. We investigated the attitudes of countries of predominantly Christians regarding trust in the church across five generations including; Turn of the Century, Silent, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennial. Furthermore, we grouped each generation and country into Ingleheart-Welzel’s cultural map. Each generation was grouped by Baltic, English Speaking, Catholic Europe, North America, Orthodox, and Protestant Europe groups as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Ingleheart-Wetzel’s cultural map (Source:http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp).

The authors were interested to discover the answers to two research questions:

1. Do generations have similar or different attitudes when it comes to trust in the Christian church?
2. Does each generation’s attitude change over time regarding trust in the Christian church, and do these changes mirror one another across generations over time?

The Findings from the study will attempt to address these research questions. Following the Findings which contain data representations for each wave, a Discussion section will consider the research questions and potential drivers that may have influenced the trends as represented. The Conclusion follow with Limitations to the study.

Findings

The data shows that trust in the institution of the church among English speaking Christians across Baby Boomer to Millennial cohorts in the West, peaked during the time of Wave 4. The research also showed a decline in Waves 5 and 6. By the same token, Muslim trust in its institutions has remained relatively constant by comparison. What might theologians and other religious leaders make of this and what are the indicators of current trends? Is the decline in institutional trust among English speaking age cohort groups continuing? What factors may explain why Muslim trust in religious institutions have not dropped as dramatically? What are the implications of these numbers, if any? If the critical issue is not trust in ‘institutions’, then, what other unofficial groupings might be filling in the gap (if any)?

When looking at trust in religious institutions (church) by generation, there are some notable indicators by wave. Starting with Wave 4, attitudes among English speaking Christians and Muslim adherents were recorded within Baby Boomers, Xers, and Millennials generations and their comparably aged cohorts within the Muslim world, with interesting implications as Wave 4, 5, and 6 were implemented over time (Waves 1-3 predated Xer and Millennial cohort groups).

Wave 3 results, which predated Millennial and after age cohort groups found trust in Christian churches in the English speaking world in general, just over 40% of baby boomers reported “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in church; just over 35% of Xers reported “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in church At the same time within the Muslim faith, more than 62% of the same generational cohort as Baby Boomers in the U.S. reported “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in the Muslim religion while more than 60% of the same generational cohort as Xers in the U.S. reported “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in the Muslim religion.

However, in Wave 4, the number in the English speaking world among Baby Boomers reporting “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in church rose to
almost 75%. Within the Muslim world a similar rise was reported to 74%. English speaking Christian Xers reported a rise to almost 80% with Muslim adherents within the same cohort grouping reporting trust in their religious institutions at 73%. Wave 4 data captured the front end of the Millennials cohort with English speaking Christians reporting about 25% trust in the institution of the church while Muslims reported over 75% of “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in their religious institutions.

In a nutshell, over Waves 4 through 6, trust in the Christian institution of church in the English speaking West started off high among Baby Boomers, Xers, and Millennials and their comparably aged cohorts within the Muslim world but subsequent waves saw a precipitous drop in trust among Christians while trust among Muslims appeared to decline slightly or remain relatively constant. Wave 4 reported that English speaking Christians trust in institutional church is as follows:

- Baby Boomers: 75%
- Xers: 80%
- Millennial: 25%

The comparative data for Muslim trust in religious institutions during the same period of time is as follows:

- Equivalent of Baby Boomer age cohort: over 74%
- Equivalent of Xers age cohort: 73%
- Equivalent of Millennial age cohort: 75%

Wave 5 sees these numbers dip across both English speaking Christians and Muslims. English speaking Christian trust in institutional church is as follows:

- Baby Boomers: 43%
- Xers: 45%
- Millennial: 40%

During the same wave, Muslim trust in religious institutions was as follows:

- Equivalent of Baby Boomer age cohort: over 68%
- Equivalent of Xers age cohort: 65%
- Equivalent of Millennial age cohort: 61%

Finally, wave 6 reported showed that English speaking Christian trust in institutional church was as follows:

- Baby Boomers: 46%
- Xers: 43%
- Millennial: 43%

During this same wave Muslim trust in religious institutions was as follows:

- Equivalent of Baby Boomer age cohort: over 69%
- Equivalent of Xers age cohort: 71%
- Equivalent of Millennial age cohort: 65%

This data shows that longitudinally Baby Boomers and Xers interest in Church as an institution has dropped dramatically. Millennials interest in Church as an institution has increased slightly. Comparing this to Muslim data, there has been a slight drop in interest over the time period of this study, however, it is not as drastic as the drop in Christian interest in the Church as an institution.

**Analysis over time.** Looking back at the data that was collected in the early waves of the study we see that regarding the question, “Do you have trust in the Church as an institution?” that there has been a decline in trust in generations from the turn of the century. The data is incomplete, however the trend is clear.

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<th>Wave 1, By Generation</th>
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**Table 2. Decline in trust in Wave 1.**

In Wave 2 the data is also limited. Even so, the decline continues to be prominent for both Catholic Europe and Latin America, with Catholic Europe experiencing the biggest decline. The data in Wave 2 included Gen X.
In Wave 3, the trend continues downwards, however the trend is stable in Latin America and in the Orthodox Church groups.

Table 4. Decline in trust for Wave 3.

In Wave 4, more data is available. This wave reveals that Latin American and the Orthodox Church are experiencing declines. In the meantime, Protestant Europe experiences an increase in trust in the church as an institution with the Gen X group. This wave is used as a baseline for waves to come. Wave 4 showed that 72.5% of Muslims had trust in the ‘church’ as an institution.

Table 5. Decline in trust for Wave 4.

In Wave 5, Millennials are included in the data as the latest generation. In this wave all of the trends are downwards except for Catholic Europe which shows a slight resurgence of trust among Millennials. Wave 5 showed that 82.6% of Muslims had trust in the ‘church’ as an institution.

Table 6. Decline in trust for Wave 5.

Wave 6 shows a decline in all groups except an even value for trust for English Speaking groups from Gen X to the Millennials. By comparison, Wave 6 showed that 95.8% of Muslims had trust in the ‘church’ as an institution.

Table 7. Decline in trust for Wave 6.

Discussion

The ability of the church to be significant to individuals in any generation may relate to its relevance and influence. The church may have an impact on those who are influenced by it in different ways. Figure 6 below shows that the impact of the church relates both to commitment and to the positive and negative influence of the institution. As a person is increasingly vested in the institution they are more vulnerable to being influenced by the church. This influence contributes to well-being or ill-being, and correlates to relevancy in the minds of potential parishioners. The role that a person holds in the church body has an effect on the person’s relationship with other coreligionists. The amount of social support each person needs, gets, or gives varies by their social role. Each role has an amount of exposure to vulnerability in relation to their
emotional commitment. Positional exposure and influence potential increases with vestment in the institution. Vulnerability to positive and negative interaction increases influencing well-being or ill-being. As commitment increases a parishioner may begin to feel trapped as an exit becomes less likely. Stress associated with the requirements of the position may have a deleterious effect on well-being. By contrast, if the parishioner can cope and contribute effectively, the effect may contribute to well-being.

Table 8. Influence of the church based on commitment.

With this in mind, how would we interpret the data regarding the first research question; Do generations have similar or different attitudes when it comes to trust in the Christian church? First, we might consider the presence of substitutes. Specifically, with the passing of time, have substitutes been introduced that replace the social aspect of the church. Communities have been developed extensively on social media, as an example. People are connected now more than ever. This mega-trend raises pertinent questions about the substitution of these communities for emotional support instead of the traditional church body. Have these social media platforms effectively replaced the potential well-being that the church has provided in the past? Do modern social networks support physical and mental health or diminish it? To what extent is the ‘human’ element critical in support networks? While it is important to address and understand the full impact of social media on Millennials, for example, it is also important to consider the aspects of how it affects interpersonal communication and relationships across all generations. Additionally, it is important to understand how social media plays a part in both forming and maintaining relationships. This will help with understanding the effectiveness of the substitution. To understand these intricate impacts, we need to consider all the positive and negatives, so that we may truly understand everything behind the effect social media brings. So, how does social media impact interpersonal communication, a basis for meaningful relationships? Studies by Tardanico (2012) and Drago (2017) have shown that social media, when used significantly, has a deleterious effect on relationships and interpersonal communication. Studies by Tardanico show that communication is 93% based on body language. Social media struggles to enable a body language-based exchange. The effects of electronic communication dominating interaction has diminished the impact of context and passion leading to miss-communication. Inferences on minimal communication lead to miss-interpretation and the need for repeated follow up. Dago also indicated that 92% of the respondents in her study stated that technology has negatively affected society’s ability to communicate face-to-face. The inability of electronic-based social organizations to meet the needs of members is clear. This may partly explain the resurgence of interest in church as an institution among Millennials as they have determined that social media is not a substitute for church-based relationships. The PEW Research Center provides some incite from their Religious Landscape survey (PEW, 2019). PEW’s latest survey indicates that young Millennials who identify as Evangelical Protestants are about the same as Older Millennials. Further information is provided by the site that church attendance is higher for Younger Millennials than for Older Millennials. While this is a chance for the church to be relevant, there are other more disturbing trends on the site. For example, Younger Millennials are less likely to pray, experience spiritual well-being, see the importance of religion, believe in God, have spiritual peace, have a guiding source of right or wrong, believe in an absolute right and wrong, or read scripture. Even so, Younger Millennials believe that there is a heaven and hell more often than Older Millennials. While this may be encouraging, this data is informative regarding the millennial generation in the U.S. that appears to be somewhat lost without knowing where to go for direction. This must contribute to ill-being as it relates the church as an institution because Millennials don’t see the church as a solution for their problems.
Social networks aside, do church-based social networks enhance the psychological well-being of its parishioners? This is, ultimately, the critical question. The church can do this by: (1) helping people cope effectively with the deleterious effects of stressful life events; (2) bolstering feelings of personal control and self-worth; and (3) fostering hope and optimism, which are linked with enhanced feelings of psychological well-being (Krause 1987a, 1987b, Nunn 1996). Mental stimulation and active social engagement can both happen in a church environment. Conversely, negative interaction can contribute to ill-being. The Scripture, which Millennials seem to be less interested in than other generations (PEW, 2019), discusses specifically how the church should encourage coreligionists to help others in need. This is fundamental to the Christian faith and is the topic of parables taught by Jesus. Complications rise from helping others. These complications should be less frequent in Christian environments if the intent is pure. A classic paper by Simmel (1905) argues that there is a sociological essence of religion. The function of religion is to promote faith in human relationships. Perhaps the Millennial generation has encountered persistent negative interactions within the church. Furthermore, they may not be satisfied with the emotional support they are receiving from other parishioners. They may also feel free, as they are unsatisfied early in a lower social role with a low level of commitment, to find another place to ‘worship’. This may suggest that Millennials are finding more ill-being than well-being in the church as an institution. They are then pushed to find social support from other relationships. Separately among parishioners in the church, as the negativity from interactions in the church pushes its way up the commitment chain, roles at higher levels experience high levels of stress that may lead to burnout. Turnover then visits all levels of commitment in the role schema as shown in Figure 6.

Stress can reduce the effectiveness of roles at the highest levels. According to Henry et al. (1991), work-related stress can impair the ability of a ‘minister’ to provide spiritual leadership, can contribute to risky behaviors, and contribute to a decrease in the quality of their family life (if they have one) (Henry et al., 1991; Ostrander, Henry, and Fournier, 1994). Leaders in higher roles with greater responsibility in the church may experience a diminished amount of emotional support from those around them as their ‘performance’ diminishes. In sum, the drivers of well- and ill-being may cause a change in the perception of the church as an institution as the church becomes more or less relevant to parishioners.

To the second research question: Does each generation’s attitude change over time regarding trust in the Christian church and do these changes mirror one another across generations over time? Said another way, are people disillusioned or inspired by the church as an institution over time? As each generation gets older do they trust the church more or less? These questions can be asked another way, do people get more religious as they get older? The data suggests that this is the case. Especially the results in Wave 6 show an increase over Wave 5 for almost all of the groups. This suggests that regardless of your generation, you will be more likely to become more religious as you age than becoming less religious. This question shows a nuance when it is considered over cultures. In Western cultures including Latin America and Confucian countries, the effect is a significant increase in interest in religion, however, the impact of age on religion is considerably smaller in Southeast Asia and the Islamic world. It is also barely present in Africa perhaps due to a generally fatalistic view of life. These patterns raise questions about aging and religiosity that could instigate further research. It may be true that the fears of mortality are not universal, but cultural. Alternatively, coping mechanisms for late life identity crises may vary by culture and may not be religious. In some cases the level of religiosity may remain nearly constant over a life-time and so variations are not conspicuous.
Conclusion

The church can be significant, relevant, and influential to all members no matter what their generation. As members become increasingly vested in the institution they become influenced by the church to a greater degree. This influence contributes to well-being or ill-being, and correlates to relevancy in the minds of potential parishioners. If stress develops with a position within the church, regardless of level from parishioner to leadership, this may have a deleterious effect on well-being of the member. This is particularly true for the church leadership which can decrease their ability to minister to the congregation. The support that leadership feels can be diminished as a result of smaller social support systems at upper levels (which is consistent in all organizations). However, if the parishioner can contribute positively to the organization and avoid stress this may contribute to well-being.

Generationally we find that the electronic-based social organization do not meet the needs of the members in the same interpersonal ways as does a church. This could explain the resurging interest in church among the millennial generation as they realize they need more social support than what the electronic social structures provide. The church can provide social support by helping members with stressful life events, developing deeper feelings of self-worth and individual control, and fostering hope and optimism to develop a higher sense of well-being. However, interestingly regardless of generation, the older the individual the more likely that the petitioner will become more religious. Culturally, in Western cultures including Latin America and Confucian countries, the effect is a significant increase in interest in religion, however, the impact of age on religion is considerably smaller in Southeast Asia and the Islamic world.

In sum, the drivers of well- and ill-being may cause a change in the perception of the church as an institution as the church becomes more or less relevant to parishioners.

Limitations

Further research is needed on several fronts. First, the theoretical framework for this study is identity theory. The key component of the conceptual perspective is the assessment of the salience of the church as an institution over time and within generations. Although the authors propose that the church may contribute to the trends in trust in the institution through its contribution to well- and ill-being of its parishioners, more study is needed on this perspective. Identity theory may have its own limitations as identities continue to blend.

Second, the measurement of well- and ill-being in this study is limited to its correlation to generational perspectives of the institution. This is not precise and is inferred. Further study can be used to substantiate or refute the claim of dependency. The nature of the contributors to these effects could be studied further, including their relative influence. Probing the nature of the drivers could be accomplished using surveys. Collected information would provide a better understanding of the relationship between driver and impact. Some negative interaction may not even be church related. Some conflict may relate to the style of leadership of those who have influence over decisions to be made. An inability to resolve theological differences may also be a driver of perspectives on the relevance of the church as an institution. Positive and negative interaction influences the trust of a parishioner in the church and affects the ability of the church to be relevant in the life of any role who participates in the church’s activities.

More information could be obtained regarding the nature of these interactions and their influence on trust in the church. Alternative causal models may be considered. Additional stressors may also be worthy of discussion. Ultimately, the goal of the study was to create a better understanding of generational participants in church-based social relations as these interactions are critical to the trust that a role participant has in the church as an institution. If the church understands these mechanisms and their drivers it has the opportunity to be more relevant to each parishioner’s physiological and psychological well-being thereby recovering some of the significance it has lost as an institution.

References


