

EDITORIAL: Maybe the Pew poll really is correct

July 3, 2008

The “non-dogmatic” results from the latest [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#) poll generated buzz and created controversy. But maybe they’re not as off-base as critics claim. And maybe the politicization of religion explains the reason why.

The Pew Forum’s U.S. [Religious Landscape Survey](#) revealed most Americans take a “non-dogmatic approach” to their faith. Strong majorities of almost every faith group (Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are the only exceptions) indicated they agree that “many religions can lead to eternal life.” Even Southern Baptists, whose doctrinal statements and historic preaching have emphasized Christianity’s exclusive faith claim, tilt toward tolerance. Sixty-one percent of Southern Baptists said they agree that other religions can lead people to eternal life; only 33 percent said their faith is the sole path to salvation.

Justifiably, some critics have found fault with this particular Pew question. They have noted the question asks about many “religions,” and they have wondered whether that word confused participants. To a pollster, “religions” might differentiate between the world’s faith groups, such as Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others. But to a Baptist, “religions” might mean other faith groups, such as Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and members of Assemblies of God and Churches of Christ.

So, perhaps 61 percent of Baptists don’t really believe Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus go to heaven. Maybe, when they’re feeling

particularly ecumenical, they think their Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Pentecostal and Church of Christ friends will walk the streets of gold.

Still, by any reckoning, 61 percent is a slew of Baptists. It's hard to imagine so many of them misunderstood the question. Whatever the final percentage, we come back to the conclusion that many Baptists meant exactly what they told the pollsters: They think they'll see Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Hindus and Buddhists in heaven.

Traditional Baptist thinking on this subject points to two New Testament passages: "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6) and "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Baptists have interpreted these verses to guard Christianity's exclusive faith claims.

But Baptists have been stronger on relationship than theology. We come by this naturally, because we emphasize our saving relationship with Jesus, not precise arguments for the historicity and theological validity of our faith. For example: How many of us learned to witness by countering arguments against faith with, "This is what Jesus has done for me"?

Since we are a relational people, it's only natural that we extend those relationships to others. For more than 30 years, many Baptists have been building relationships upon common positions on political issues that have their grounding in faith perspectives. Abortion and homosexuality stand out, as do gambling, hunger and poverty.

Decades ago, church historian Bill Leonard saw this and predicted people of faith would disengage from denominations and coalesce around political issues on the conservative-liberal political spectrum. At the time, most people interpreted that as "people of Christian faith," but politics being

what it is, those coalitions broadened to include other faith groups with similar social and political perspectives.

Meanwhile, our communities have become more multicultural, and Baptists have formed friendships with people from all over the world, whose faiths are different, but whose values are similar.

And following the historical pattern, Baptist relationships may have overwhelmed Baptist theology.