

## Is the growth of the nonreligious in our society a good thing?

Pat Perriello | Jul. 10, 2013 NCR Today

[There are some fascinating results](#) [1] from a recent poll by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

The poll asks whether the growth in the number of Americans who are nonreligious is good or bad. While 48 percent say this is a bad development for American society, a total of 50 percent say the development is either positive or does not matter.

The data among young people and among Hispanic Catholics is particularly surprising. A total of 50 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 29 say being religious doesn't matter, while only 34 percent of those over age 65 feel that way. A startling 59 percent of Hispanic Catholics see this growth as either positive or not really a concern.

While some question the validity of the survey, Christian Smith of the University of Notre Dame believes the findings reaffirm the notion that the young are more tolerant of religious diversity.

Tolerance does seem to be the key to understanding the results of this survey. Even though 80 percent of Americans consider themselves religious, only 48 percent seem concerned about the rise of the nonreligious.

As far as the Catholic Hispanic population is concerned, I suspect we still have much to learn about this group. They still have many surprises for us in the years ahead. While there is clearly genuine and deep religious fervor among these Hispanics, I believe they are not as tied to rigid notions of orthodoxy and blind adherence to the views of the hierarchy as we might think. Note the overwhelming vote for President Barack Obama and the large numbers willing to move to evangelical congregations as two examples of an independent-minded flock.

Pope Francis himself seems to be inclining us in this direction of tolerance when he tells us that [even atheists can go to heaven](#) [2].

The message seems to be that the most important thing is not what we believe, but how we live our lives. Those who are doing good are already touched by God.

That doesn't mean our religion is not important to us. It means each of us must find our own way to what we believe, but we can share values that make it possible for us to work together to make good things happen in our world.

Those of us who have grown up in a multicultural society have learned that lesson by going to school, playing, and having lasting friendships with a diverse group of Americans. We have even learned that it is this diversity that has strengthened ourselves, our country and even our religious faith.

**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.religionnews.com/2013/07/05/is-the-growth-of-the-nonreligious-good-or-bad-americans-are-divided/>
- [2] <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/05/29/187009384/Pope-Francis-Even-Atheists-Can-Be-Redeemed>