

Cultural Research Center



American Worldview Inventory 2021

Release #5: Top 10 Most Seductive Unbiblical Ideas Embraced by Americans

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The American public flaunts its free will in many ways, not the least of which is by embracing a number of seductive—but decidedly unbiblical beliefs—as part of their worldview.

According to new analysis of data from the *American Worldview Inventory 2021* from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, the “Top 10” most prevalent “seductive unbiblical ideas” embraced by American adults include:

- the spiritually inclusive idea that “having faith matters more than what faith you have”;
- all faiths are of equal value;
- belief in “karma,” the idea rooted in Eastern religions that “you get what you give”;
- the dismissal of absolute truth;
- commitment to personal, subjective morality;
- the idea that people are “basically good”;
- success is determined by happiness, comfort, goodness, or fulfilled potential;
- sexual relations apart from marriage are morally acceptable;
- rejection of the notion that people are inherently sinful;
- and the conclusion that the purpose of accumulated personal wealth is unrelated to God’s purposes.

The *AWVI 2021* shows that even the 6% of adults who have a biblical worldview harbor many of these counter-biblical ideas as part of their personal philosophy of life.

The survey reveals that among the more than five dozen beliefs and behaviors measured in recent CRC surveys, including the *American Worldview Inventory 2021*, the most egregious departures from biblical teaching related to faith selection, personal behavior, decision-making, the human condition, and life outcomes.

Faith Selection

Most adults in the United States (62%) believe that “having faith matters more than which faith you have.” That perspective coincides precisely with another counter-biblical view held by a large majority (62%): “all religious faiths are of equal value.”

Those views were most common among people attending Catholic or mainline Protestant churches, along with those who are affiliated with non-Christian religions. Other segments who embraced these views included Democrats, liberals, and people living in wealthier households.

Such inclusive religious thinking is a product of worldviews such as postmodernism, which teach that there is no way to know about the existence of God, but that what matters is having a faith that serves your purposes well on earth (and beyond).

Surprisingly, many individuals who have a biblical worldview (42%) also accept the idea that having some type of faith matters more than which one. Although all of those with a biblical worldview embrace Christianity as their faith of choice, and have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and savior, close to half of them struggle with Christianity’s claim to exclusivity.

Yet, the Bible unashamedly teaches that the Judeo-Christian faith is the only valid spiritual pathway. Some criticize Christianity for being an exclusive faith—the “one true faith”—as arrogant and elitist. But the Bible notes that people are called by their Creator God to love, worship and serve only Him and that all other deities are merely idols (Ps. 96:4,5; Phil. 2:9-11; Deut. 6:13-14). Jesus Christ is revealed as the living God with whom a grace-based relationship is the only way to eternal peace with God (John 14:6, Acts 4:12).

Personal Behavior

Although Eastern Mysticism is not intentionally embraced by many Americans—less than 1% has a worldview dominated by Eastern Mysticism principles and beliefs—some of its beliefs have nestled their way into the hearts and minds of many people. Karma is one of those principles: nearly six out of 10 adults (57%) say they believe in karma. In fact, the concept has become so comfortable to Americans that one-third of the people with the biblical worldview (33%) also embrace this concept.

Many people contend that karma is a valid and spiritually harmless principle. It refers to cause and effect; what you have done in the past or present will determine your future. It is related to the idea of reincarnation; what you do in this life will determine the nature of your next life, after your “rebirth.” As noted in prior *American Worldview Inventory* reports, 9% of adults expect to be reincarnated, and four out of 10 (39%) believe such a “rebirth” is a real possibility for them. That concept conflicts with biblical teaching that we die once (Heb. 9:27) and God determines our fate. As such, Christians view life as a God-directed journey, not a self-determined cycle.

Karma is not a biblical perspective. Certainly, the idea resembles Paul’s exhortation that a person will reap what he or she sows (Gal. 6:7). However, that passage relates to what will happen to a person when they face God’s judgment. Rather than personally determining our future through our actions, it is God who directs the footsteps of human beings and determines their destiny.

While karma is inescapable—you get what you give—the Bible suggests that because God will forgive those who earnestly seek His grace, our physical actions do not result in inevitable spiritual outcomes. Karma teaches that an impersonal force is behind our future, and reality shows that people sometimes get what they deserve—but sometimes they do not.

In contrast, the Bible teaches that a personal, engaged Creator uniquely and predictably rewards and punishes every individual based upon His explicit life principles, leaving nothing to chance. In other words, in a world driven by karma, man determines his own future; in God’s universe, everyone’s future is in His hands.

But karma is not the only errant behavioral idea that most Americans have adopted. The *AWVI 2021* also showed that two-thirds of adults (68%) now contend that premarital sex between two people who believe they love each other is either morally acceptable or not even a moral issue. This thinking is endorsed by various worldviews, such as secular humanism, moralistic therapeutic deism, and Marxism. To their credit, a mere 2% of adults who possess a biblical worldview concur that premarital sex is morally acceptable.

While American culture has become increasingly comfortable and casual regarding sexual relations, the Bible is clear that such relations are to occur only within the context of marriage. (1 Cor. 6:18-20, 1 Cor. 7:1-2, 1 Cor. 7:8-9). Sexual relations among people who are married, but not to each other, are also forbidden, commonly known as adultery.

The *AWVI 2021* noted that acceptance of premarital sex is especially widespread among spiritual skeptics (88%), residents of the Northeast (79%), and self-identified LGBTQ adults (78%). An overwhelming majority of people who draw their worldview heavily from each of the non-biblical worldviews endorse premarital sex, ranging from 81% of those who frequently rely on Nihilist philosophy to 96% of those who draw heavily from postmodern perspectives.

Nearly half of all theologically born-again individuals (43%) accept premarital sex as morally acceptable.

Decision-making

The declining influence of the Bible in American culture—and along with it, the belief that absolute moral truth exists—is evident in how people make decisions that determine their behaviors.

Do Americans seek to know and understand moral absolutes? No, because they no longer believe that such unconditional parameters exist. Overall, two out of three adults (67%) argue that there are no moral absolutes. Six out of 10 (58%) contend that moral truth is determined by each individual, according to what seems right to them. Consistent with that view, only four out of 10 (39%) say that objective moral truth exists.

Most people (70%) rely upon their feelings, experiences, or the council of family and friends to decide what is right and wrong. Relatively few (31%) identify the Bible as their primary source of moral guidance. This situation is reminiscent of the scriptural passage that cautioned that people abandoned God's truth and did what seemed right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6).

The rejection of absolute, objective moral truth is not unexpected in a nation where only 6% of adults have a biblical worldview. All of the other major worldviews that are demonstrably influencing Americans argue that all truth is subjective, conditional, and personal.

Indisputably, millions of Americans have moved away from believing that the Bible contains relevant and reliable moral absolutes for their life. Yet the Bible explains that it is God's guidance, suitable to affect every dimension of our life with His truth (2 Tim. 3:16). To prepare His people to live successful lives, God provided us with everything required to live a godly life, including the Bible (2 Pet. 1: 3-7, 19-21). We are assured that His Law is right and true, and serves our best interests when it is followed (John 17:17, Romans 7:12).

The Human Condition

Without the Bible as a guidebook for life, it is not surprising that people are confused about how life works. For instance, three out of four adults reject the idea that humans are born into sin and need to be saved from the consequences of that spiritual deficit by Jesus Christ. Only 25% believe in the concept of original sin and redemption through Jesus. Complementing that view, seven out of 10 Americans (69%) maintain that people are basically good.

Worldviews that conflict with the biblical perspective deny or downplay sin. For instance, Marxism teaches that people were originally good but were corrupted by society. Secular humanism posits that people are neither good nor bad, they are who they are. The view of Eastern Mysticism is that everyone is a divine creature engaged in the eternal pursuit of unity and a perfected consciousness, but certainly not inherently sinful.

The biblical narrative tells a different story, describing how Adam and Eve sinned and passed along a heritage of sinfulness to all of humanity (Rom. 5:12, 18; Ps. 51:5). The result is that no one is protected from having a sinful nature (Ps. 14:2-3, Luke 18:19). We cannot overcome the effects of sin without appropriating the grace of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our personal spiritual, eternal redemption.

Yet most Americans believe in their own goodness and are not overly concerned about the effects of sin, if it even exists. The people especially impervious to the flawed nature of humanity are those associated with non-Christian faiths or with no faith system; Millennials; political liberals; upscale individuals; and residents of the Northeast.

The *AWVI 2021* also identified a shockingly large percentage of born-again Christians (44%) who do not accept the idea that people are born into sin, and a large majority (69%) embrace the notion that all people are basically good.

Life Outcomes

Interestingly, when it comes to life outcomes the views of people who have a biblical worldview and those who don't are diametrically opposed.

For instance, four out of five people with a biblical worldview believe that the personal accumulation of wealth has been entrusted to them by God to manage for His purposes (81%). However, just one out of five other adults (19%) embrace that belief. Common alternative views about wealth are that it is earned and deserved; it is a reflection of how unfair society can be toward those who work hard but do not get ahead; or that it is supplied for personal survival and pleasure.

Overall, the people least likely to accept wealth as a matter of stewardship for God’s purposes included non-Christians and Skeptics, Millennials, Hispanics, and liberals. Only a minority of born-again Christians (42%) locked onto the notion of wealth as a gift from God to invest for His kingdom.

Adults with a biblical worldview were nearly universally agreed that success is best indicated by consistent obedience to God (98%). Across the nation, though, just one out of five people (21%) bought that perspective. In their minds, success was more like to be defined as being a “good person” (a chief ideal of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism), experiencing happiness or freedom (a view pushed by Postmodernism), or living a healthy and productive life without economic oppression (a Marxist objective).

Top 10 Most Seductive Unbiblical Ideas Americans Adopt			
Summary description of unbiblical idea	All Adults	Have Biblical Worldview?	
		Yes	No
Believe in karma	57%	33%	58%
Having some faith matters more than which faith	62	42	62
Premarital sex between unmarried people who love each other is morally acceptable	74	4	77
Absolute moral truth does not exist	67	14	69
People are basically good	69	52	71
All religious faiths are of equal value	62	9	64
Most trusted personal source of moral guidance is something other than the Bible	69	4	71
Personal wealth is to be used to achieve outcomes other than advancing God’s purposes	81	19	83
Success is about happiness, fulfillment, good health, higher consciousness, goodness, or productivity	79	2	82
People are not born into sin and therefore do not need to be saved by Jesus Christ	75	3	77
Source: <i>American Worldview Inventory 2021</i> , February 2021, N=2,000 adults 18+, conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.			

Points in Common

According to George Barna, who directed and analyzed the data from the *American Worldview Inventory 2021* at the Cultural Research Center, these most seductive unbiblical perspectives have two factors in common.

“So many of these perspectives are about control,” Barna explained. “Whether we are taking charge of our destiny, our spirituality, boundaries dictated by truth, moral behaviors, or wealth management strategies, Americans are largely driven by a need to have control of every aspect of their lives.

“Biblical Christianity threatens that self-interest by requiring us to deliver control of our lives to God,” Barna said. “It is clear from the research that most individuals—even a large majority of those who consider themselves to be Christian, and who participate in Christian activities—are unwilling to surrender the reins of their life to a God whom they do not personally know, understand, or trust.”

Pressed to demonstrate the relationship of control to people’s worldview positions, he noted that karma, believing that all faiths are equal or that any faith is acceptable, the rejection of moral absolutes, the ability to use wealth as desired, are all examples of adults exacting control rather than following biblical lifestyle admonitions. He also pointed out that the ability to make unfettered choices gives individuals control.

Barna suggested that the other seductive life views center on experiencing pleasure. several of the most seductive

unbiblical worldviews focus on providing the individual with pleasure through sexual, material, or relational means.

“Biblical Christianity is about giving God control, making choices that reflect His prescribed ways of life. That’s hard for Americans to embrace,” Barna commented. “A faith that esteems brokenness, submission, surrender, sacrifice, and simplicity is in some ways antithetical to the American ideal. But that is the ultimate choice that every one of us has to make.”

About the Research

The *American Worldview Inventory (AWI)* is an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over). Begun as an annual tracking study in 2020, the assessment is based on several dozen worldview-related questions drawn from eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

AWI 2021 is the first-ever national survey conducted in the United States measuring both biblical and competing worldviews. It was undertaken in February 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of indeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity.

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school’s campus in Glendale, Arizona, in the Phoenix metropolitan area. In addition to conducting the annual *American Worldview Inventory*, CRC also introduced the *ACU Student Worldview Inventory (SWVI)* in 2020. That survey is administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, and a final administration among students just prior to their graduation. The *ACU SWVI* enables the University to track the worldview development of its student body and to make changes to that process as recommended by the research. The Cultural Research Center also conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to transforming American culture with biblical truth.

CRC is guided by George Barna, Director of Research, and Tracy Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity but serves with a variety of theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. Access to the results from past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, are available at www.culturalresearchcenter.com. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.arizonachristian.edu.