

# Newsweek

## Searching For A Holy Spirit

BY [JOHN LELAND](#) 5/7/00 AT 8:00 PM

Rob Rienow, a pastor at Wheaton Bible Church outside Chicago, tells a story to describe the beliefs of the teenagers he sees. Rienow, 28, has been ministering to adolescents in the area for six years. He recently asked a group of kids from troubled homes the question, Who do you think God is? Their answers were as individual as the kids themselves. One thought God was like his grandfather: "He's there, but I never see him." Another took a harder view, describing "an evil being who wants to punish me all the time." Two more opinions followed. Finally, the last teen weighed in: "I think you're *all* right, because that's what you really believe." In other words, as Rienow relates it, God is whatever works for you. On this, all of the youths agreed.

The unsung story of today's teenagers may be how religious or spiritual they are. "We're witnessing a new revival of religion," says Conrad Cherry, director of the Center for Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University/Purdue University. Prayer circles and faith-based groups like True Love Waits or Fellowship of Christian Athletes have proliferated in high schools and college campuses like so many WWJD bracelets; Christian rock festivals and CDs rival their secular counterparts, bringing the message out of the pulpit and into the mosh pit and tattoo tent. Three decades after the rebels of the baby boom appeared to run away from organized religion, "a lot more teenagers are becoming more willing to say, 'Hey, I'm a Christian'," says Jacintha Bavaro, 16, who sings in the choir of her Roman Catholic church in Glen Ellyn, Ill. Jacintha's mother, Laura, 37, concurs. "They talk about it and seem a lot more into it than when I was a teenager," she says. "We used to pretend we were going to church and go to Dunkin' Donuts."

But the generation's spiritual profile, as Pastor Rienow found out, is quite complex, and often improvised on the fly. In a new NEWSWEEK Poll of teenagers, 78 percent said their religion was important to them, but only half said they attended services regularly, a figure that has declined since the 1970s. These numbers reflect several conflicting currents. Fundamentalist groups—Christian, Jewish, Muslim—have become more attractive to teenagers, as they have to adults. For a generation raised

amid decay in families, schools and the streets, strict doctrine offers an anchor.

"Where the youth movements of the '60s and '70s were liberationist, movements are now constrictive, all about setting limits," says Wade Clark Roof, author of "Spiritual Marketplace" and professor of religion and society at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "There is a hunger for guidelines that parents haven't offered."

At the same time, though, a much broader swath of the teen population is reacting to the collapse of institutions as a license to experiment. Rather than seek absolute truths in doctrine, they cross denominational boundaries, savvy consumers in the broader marketplace of belief systems. Many describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious. "I believe there is a higher power at work in my life, but I do not have a name for it," says Amy McKinney, 18. "When I pray I do not ask a god to make everything all right. Instead I ask myself to be strong." In place of strict adherence to doctrine, many teens embrace a spirit of eclecticism and a suspicion of absolute truths. In a 1999 poll of teenagers by the religious researcher George Barna, more than half agreed with the statement "All religious faiths teach equally valid truths." Where explorers of the baby boom tried on Zen today, Methodism tomorrow, teens might cobble together bits of several faiths: a little Buddhist meditation or Roman Catholic ritual, whatever mixture appeals at the time. Tommy Greenberg, 16, who says he's one of few Jewish students in his Minneapolis high school, has attended Lutheran services with a friend, just to see what it was like. "If they'd been saying things in Hebrew," he says, "I'd have thought I was at Temple Israel. The atmosphere was the same, a sense of something powerful, uplifting."

Even more than their baby-boomer parents, teenagers often pick and choose what works for them. At the Ramona Convent Secondary School in Los Angeles, Ashling Gabig, 16, receives a traditional diet of Catholic doctrine. But like many of her peers, she is as likely to identify herself as "spiritual" as "Catholic." And she has customized her own path to faith. "My perceptions of God and religion are quite different from those of a devout Catholic," she says. "I don't think of the pope as this holy man who is closest to God. I believe in Darwin's theory of evolution, and the possibility of God being a woman. I never believed in the story of Adam and Eve, because it was so demeaning towards women." She does, however, believe in prayer and karma.

As they sample from various faiths, students have become more accepting of each other's beliefs, even when those beliefs are stringent. Clayton Keenon, a high-school

junior in Glen Ellyn, Ill., says he is known among his classmates as "the religious guy," but this does not make him the odd man out. Keenon, 17, an evangelical Christian, is one of a growing minority of teenagers who are vowing to defer sex until marriage. "There really is an atmosphere of 'whatever you think is OK'," he says. "Just don't tell me what to think. I'll figure it out for myself." In increasingly diverse communities, religious teens are just part of the mix. Zaynab Salman, 17, a Muslim who wears a scarf and prays five times a day, says her faith and its proscriptions against dating and vice serve as a constant reminder that "even though I am living here, I am not a typical American teenager." Yet even so, she says, at her high school in Troy, Mich., "I've heard some Muslim kids get teased about their scarf, but I haven't. I just get questions."

Many of the teenagers who are picking and choosing are the children of mixed marriages, a growing slice of the American population. About half of all Jews, for example, now marry outside the religion; the figure for Catholics is nearing 50 percent. For these teens, the religious smorgasbord begins at home. Ashley Rosenberg, 14, a biracial eighth grader in Farmington Hills, Mich., works a spiritual calculus that would have baffled previous generations. The daughter of a Catholic mother and an adoptive Jewish father, she began attending a Baptist church when she was 5. Now she goes to a Catholic church every Sunday, but still considers herself Baptist. "I'm in a Jewish youth group because most of my friends are Jewish," she says. "They don't care that I practice a different religion, but it's weird at times. Like when I had to explain that I couldn't go to a meeting because it was Palm Sunday." This broad pattern of belief—the simultaneous rise of both fundamentalism and eclecticism—accelerates through the Internet. Religious chat rooms and Web sites like Faithnet or Beliefnet act like spiritual supermarkets, offering an assortment of belief systems all within one click. "Here's exposure to pluralism in a way that no generation has had it before," says Roof. In the face of the Web's unprecedented multiplicity of truths, he says, "either you go the fundamentalist route, and say, 'By golly, we are right,' or you develop a consciousness that the world is a complex place, so it makes sense to look around at what else is in the marketplace." The Web's influence will only grow as online faith-based services become more sophisticated, targeting ever more select micro-congregations. George Barna, the Christian

researcher, predicts that within the next decade, "cyberchurches" will account for as much as 10 to 20 percent of all organized worship.

In the meantime, many teens are less interested in the good word than in connecting with faith through good works. As many as 60 percent do some kind of community service, primarily through faith-based organizations. "Teens think more about things than they get credit for," says John Gillis, a freshman at St. Albans School in Washington, D.C., where he has to do 60 hours of community service in his first three years to graduate. He also did 20 hours before being confirmed in the Catholic Church, and will do an additional 100 for an Eagle Scout project. Some teen service, certainly, is padding for a college application or fulfilling school requirements. But where doctrine has lost its authority, says James Youniss of Catholic University of America, many youths do service "for a connection with history, with a meaning system. Religion is one. Politics is one, ethnicity is one." Sarah Austin, 15, a Christian who is involved in gay and feminist causes in Decatur, Ga., rejects the stereotype that kids just care about clothes and hair. "You know, a lot of 40-year-olds care about these things, too, in addition to culture and activism. But they get credit for being interested in all those things. We don't."

Sociologists and educators talk about the "faith factor": kids involved in religion are less likely to take drugs, have early sex or engage in delinquent behaviors. In this respect, the details of theology are less important than conviction itself. Fayneese Miller, a professor of education and human development at Brown, says kids latch on to faith systems not just to lead them from temptation, but to justify their abstention. "I don't go to church every Sunday, but if it wasn't for God I wouldn't be here," says Charmaine Green, 17, a sophomore in East St. Louis. "Before, I didn't like school. Then I put my life with the Lord recently, and he has helped me understand why I need my education."

In a culture obsessed with tracking what teens buy, what crimes they commit or what they do in bed, this search for faith may be the generation's most important signature. "Their belief systems are in the long run much more important than fashions, tastes or even behavior," says William Damon, director of the Center on Adolescence at Stanford. "Behaviors come and go." For the bulk of the nation's 22 million teenagers, religion and spirituality entail a quest not for absolute truths but for ways to live

among relative truths. When the Backstreet Boys and the last eyebrow stud have faded from view, this quest will still be giving shape to a generation.