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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## Christianity's image taking a turn for the worse

**Most young non-Christians have a negative perception of the religion, and even some Christians agree, study says.**

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Christianity's image in the United States is declining, especially among young people, according to a new study.

A decade ago, an overwhelming majority of non-Christians, including people between the ages 16 and 29, were "favorably" disposed toward Christianity's role in society. But today, just 16% of non-Christians in that age group had a "good impression" of the religion, according to research by the Barna Group, a Ventura firm that has tracked trends related to values, beliefs and attitudes since 1984.

Evangelicals come under the severest attack, with just 3% of the 16- to 29-year-old non-Christians indicating favorable views toward this subgroup of believers. The study also found that many Christians were aware of their religion's image problem.

More than one in 10 evangelicals believe that "Americans are becoming more hostile and negative toward Christianity."

Among the most common perceptions held by young non-Christians about American Christianity were that it is judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), old-fashioned (78%) and too involved in politics (75%).

Even among Christians, half of young believers said they too view Christianity to be judgmental, hypocritical and too political. One-third said it was old-fashioned and out of touch with reality.

Another Barna study, released this week, found that the most common spiritual activity among teenagers and adults is prayer. In a typical week, 72% of teenagers pray, compared with 83% of adults, the study said. After prayer, teenagers' most prevalent spiritual activity was attending a worship service (48%), followed by attending Sunday school (35%), youth group (33%), small group (32%) and reading the Bible (31%).

What do young people seek through spiritual activity? The most common factors were "to worship or make a connection with God" (45% said this was very important) and "to better understand what I believe" (42%).

David Kinnaman, the lead researcher on the studies and president of the Barna Group, said that even though the world of young people is "inundated" with choices related to media, movies, television and technology, "most church-going teens tell us they rarely recall learning anything helpful on these topics in church."

### **The end of Ramadan**

Friday and today, Muslims mark the end of the holy month of Ramadan, a time of fasting and spiritual reflection.

As the end of Ramadan approached, a number of Southern California mosques sponsored all-night vigils during which Muslims worshiped, recited the Koran and prayed. One such vigil was held Wednesday at the Orange County Islamic Foundation, with services beginning at 11 p.m. and continuing into the morning.

As part of the monthlong observance, some imams in Southern California preached on nonviolence. Some based their remarks on talking points shared by the Council on American-Islamic Relations. One example:

"All Muslims around the world need to challenge not just those committing atrocities, but also the philosophy and political doctrine used by these cowards to justify their murderous deeds; because invoking Islam to commit violence, or harming/killing of any innocent people is reprehensible; and those who showcase this terror as an act of protest are equally complicit in these crimes."

Also, on Thursday more than 130 Muslim clerics and scholars from around the world called on Christian leaders to recognize similarities between Islam and Christianity as a way of fostering mutual understanding and respect between the two faiths.

### **South Koreans seek help**

In an unusual partnership that seems to transcend cultural and language barriers, South Korean military chaplains are learning about suicide-prevention techniques from Los Angeles County's world-famous Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center.

On Wednesday, an eight-member delegation headed by Col. Jong In Lee, chaplain commander of the South Korean army, spent an afternoon at the center's Culver City offices to get acquainted with various programs, including the 24-hour suicide crisis line. The session was preceded and followed by the exchange of gifts, accolades and much picture-taking.

Suicide is a huge problem in South Korea, which in 2005 had the highest rate among members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. A South Korean government report said 26.1 out of every 100,000 South Koreans took their own lives. The rate was a 100% increase from a decade earlier.

Since 2004, when a Korean-American pastor introduced a visiting South Korean army chaplain to the center, one military chaplain has completed a seven-week program there. Another chaplain, Maj. Yong Rak Lee, is in the program.

Kita Curry, president and chief executive of the center, praised the South Korean chaplains for taking leadership on a sensitive subject. "It's especially hard for men in the armed forces, in the police . . . to speak about it" because of the stigma, "so you are really brave, strong men," she said.

Curry said the center has had many international visitors over the years, but never chaplains.

"I think this is quite unique and fascinating," she said. "Clearly, they play the role of the mental health counselor in a way that is particularly emphasized."

### **Church on immigration**

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles continues to maintain a high profile in the debate over illegal immigration. In May, he delivered an address on immigration in Philadelphia, with the rebuttal provided by former Atty. Gen. Edwin M. Meese III. On Monday, he participated in a forum on immigration at Notre Dame University and began his remarks by citing the biblical underpinnings of the church's position on immigration:

"Why is the church involved in this?" Mahony asked the crowd of about 3,000 at the Joyce Center. "Well, it really starts in the Old Testament and the instructions God gave Moses and all the people on how to welcome aliens; and then [with] Jesus Christ in the Gospels, especially in Matthew 25, when he tells us that part of our recognition of Jesus in the world is to see in the face of the most hopeless the face of Jesus.

"And one of those groups he mentions by name are the strangers, the aliens, in their midst. So historically, from the time of Jesus, we have always been welcoming of everyone. In this country since the 1780s, the Catholic Church has been with, has stood with, has walked with every single wave of immigrants."

Other members of the panel were Sen. Mel Martinez (R-Florida), Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano and Louis J. Barletta, mayor of Hazleton, Pa., who described how illegal immigration has adversely affected his town. Video of the forum can be viewed at <http://forum.nd.edu>. Click on "view archived webcast."

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