

More U.S. Christians mix in 'Eastern,' New Age beliefs

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY

Going to church this Sunday? Look around.

The chances are that one in five of the people there find "spiritual energy" in mountains or trees, and one in six believe in the "evil eye," that certain people can cast curses with a look — beliefs your Christian pastor doesn't preach.

In a Catholic church? Chances are that one in five members believe in reincarnation in a way never taught in catechism class — that you'll be reborn in this world again and again.

Elements of Eastern faiths and New Age thinking have been widely adopted by 65% of U.S. adults, including many who call themselves Protestants and Catholics, according to a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released Wednesday.

FAITH & REASON: [Christmas or Hanukkah? Holidays or holy days? Interfaith families make choices](#)

ON THE WEB: [Pew's report](#)

Syncretism — mashing up contradictory beliefs like Catholic rocker [Madonna's](#) devotion to a Kabbalah-light version of Jewish mysticism — appears on the rise.

And, according to the survey's other major finding, devotion to one clear faith is fading.

Of the 72% of Americans who attend religious services at least once a year (excluding holidays, weddings and funerals), 35% say they attend in multiple places, often hop-scotching across denominations.

They are like President Obama, who currently has no home church. He has worshiped at a Baptist church, an Episcopal one, and the non-denominational chapel at Camp David.

"Mixing and matching practices and beliefs is as much the norm as it is the exception," Pew's Alan Cooperman says. "Are they grazing, sampling, just curious? We really don't know."

Even so, says Pew researcher Greg Smith, "these findings all point toward a spiritual and religious openness — not necessarily a lack of seriousness."

Among the findings:

- 26% of those who attend religious services say they do so at more than one place occasionally, and an additional 9% roam regularly from their home church for services.

- 28% of people who attend church at least weekly say they visit multiple churches outside their own tradition.

- 59% of less frequent church attendees say they attend worship at multiple places.

The survey of 2,003 adults Aug. 11-27 has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points. It measures Protestants, Catholics and the unaffiliated; there were not enough people of other faiths surveyed for analysis.

"For an extremely long time, most of us thought belonging or membership or home church was monogamous, even if it was serial monogamy, because we all know about church-switching," says sociologist of religion Scott Thumma, a professor at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research in Hartford, Conn. "Today, the individual rarely finds all their spiritual needs met in one congregation or one religion."

'Rampant confusion'

In the 1980s, [Albert Mohler](#) and Julia Jarvis were in graduate school together at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville.

Today, Mohler is president of the seminary and a leading voice for Baptist orthodoxy. He sees a "rampant confusion" about faith revealed in

the Pew findings.

"This is a failure of the pulpit as much as of the pew to be clear about what is and is not compatible with Christianity and belief in salvation only through Christ," Mohler says.

Pew says two in three adults believe in or cite an experience with at least one supernatural phenomenon, including:

- 26% find "spiritual energy" in physical things.

- 25% believe in astrology.

- 24% say people will be reborn in this world again and again.

- 23% say yoga is a "spiritual practice."

Mohler calls these "the *au courant* confusions," attachments to the latest fashionable free-floating beliefs.

"One hundred years ago, it would have been [spiritualism](#).' They wouldn't have known what yoga was but might have been attracted to the 'New Thought' of the time," Mohler says.

His former classmate giggles at that. She's an ordained minister in the progressive United Church of Christ and leads the Interfaith Family Project, which meets for weekly worship at a Silver Spring, Md., high school.

Jarvis, of Takoma Park, Md., also studies with Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and finds a spiritual dimension in yoga.

"I don't do astrology, but my mother, who grew up in Birmingham, Ala., and was a staunch Baptist all her life, looked at her horoscope daily and totally believed it," Jarvis says.

Jarvis says her late mother, like 49% of adults in the Pew survey, also had a moment of "religious or spiritual awakening."

"My mother feared for years that I was no longer saved, but just two days before she died, she had an epiphany," Jarvis says. "She said she was 'told' in a spiritual experience to put aside all religious and political differences and just love each other. That was her blessing to me, and that's what I'm doing."

Regina Roman of Alexandria, Va., calls herself "a very grounded Episcopalian" who's active in her church. But, she says, "I'm also stretching the boundaries of how we are to be here and now in this day, age and culture."

She leads pilgrimages to Egypt, New Mexico and Ireland to help travelers discover the truths and visions in Coptic, Native American and Celtic traditions. Roman celebrated the winter solstice with a home ceremony for guests to delight in the sun's gifts.

"We are all in relationship with the cosmos. We need to honor that," says Roman, who doesn't see herself crossing barriers but rather "coming full circle" with ancient ideas.

"People have always mixed religions, either in ignorance or willfully," says [Stephen Prothero](#), director of the Graduate Division of Religious and Theological Studies at [Boston University](#).

Despite the late [Pope John Paul II](#)'s warnings to explicitly avoid Buddhist and Hindu practices, Prothero says, "American Catholics are so used to not caring what the official church tells them on birth control, divorce, premarital sex and other points that they don't think they are un-Catholic when they believe and do what they please."

Combating syncretism has troubled popes for centuries, says the Rev. Dan Pattee, chairman of the theology department at [Franciscan University](#) in Steubenville, Ohio.

The problem with borrowing spiritual ideas is that "the life-giving truth becomes compromised as we understand it as Catholics," Pattee says.

The growth of mixing

Prothero sees a similar trend among Protestants, a "resistance to being told what to think."

"Even people who call themselves by denominational tags don't really feel the identity attachment to them as they once did," he says. "And without that identity marker, what's to prevent you from checking out some other church? Nothing much."

Cooperman notes that the new survey is measuring a phenomenon that may have been going on for decades. Also, it does not clearly establish how much is due to interfaith relationships.

A new study from [InterfaithFamily.com](#), which encourages Jewish-Christian couples to raise their children as Jews, looks specifically at the

Christmas/Hanukkah season. The findings are not scientific but give an indication that in intermarried couples rearing their children as Jews, most will celebrate Hanukkah — which begins on Friday night this year — at home. Less than 48% will celebrate Christmas, and largely in a secular fashion.

Pew specifically excludes the major holidays and life-cycle events to focus on ordinary worship practices. Its report says the findings on interfaith couples are "complex," in part because people in mixed marriages attend worship less frequently than those with a same-faith spouse.

The faith-mixing trend has been building; other surveys in the past two years have touched on the swirling, unbounded paths of believers:

- Forty-seven percent to 59% of Americans have changed religions at least once, a Pew survey in April found. The top reasons for most: Their spiritual needs weren't being met, or they liked another faith more or changed religious or moral beliefs.

- The percentage of people who call themselves Christian has dropped more than 11% in a generation, and so many people declined any religious label that the "Nones," now 15% of the USA, are the third-largest "religious" group after Catholics and Baptists, according to the American Religious Identification Survey last March.

- Despite Americans' overwhelming allegiance to someone they call God (92%), in Pew's 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 70% said "many religions can lead to eternal life," and 68% said "there's more than one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion."

- Most (55%) say a guardian angel has protected them from harm, and 52% believe in prophetic dreams, according to surveys by Baylor University released in 2006 and 2008.

In short, we believe our own experiences are authentic, and no "authority" can say otherwise.

That's a very "Eastern" notion, says Jim Todhunter of Bethesda, Md. Retired after three decades leading United Church of Christ congregations, he has studied in a Hindu ashram in India and practices Zen meditation and Christian contemplative prayer.

"In the Western religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — the focus is: 'What do you believe?' There is always a tremendous focus on doctrine and teachings," he says. "In the East, Buddhism and Hinduism in particular, the leading question is, 'Do you know God?' It's much more experience-based."

Either way, he adds, "however you meet God is wonderful."

http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-12-10-1Amixingbeliefs10_CV_N.htm