

# RELIGION THAT OMITTS SIN

**A**MERICANS are the most religious people in the developed world. More than 90 percent tell pollsters that they believe in God, 43 percent say they attend religious services at least once a week, and 58 percent report that religion is very important in their lives.

But what does it really mean?



**MONA  
CHAREN**

When everyone from Hillary Clinton to Ralph Reed professes to be motivated by religious values, can those values have any identifiable

content? And when the so-

ciety at large enshrines "tolerance" and reluctance to make moral judgments as the highest virtues, what can they be hearing at those weekly services?

James Davison Hunter answers that question in the spring edition of *The Public Interest*, and he concludes that at this moment in history the secular worldview is influencing the churches far more than the churches are influencing the surrounding society.

In particular, Hunter examines the moral education curricula at churches and synagogues around the nation, and he finds that the old categories of sin, repentance and redemption are out and the therapeutic language of self-esteem and self-love are in.

Even among the so-called "religious right" — Christians who tend to stand in opposition to the vulgarity, violence and impiety of the dominant culture — moral education is surprisingly imbued with the therapeutic ethic that so defines moral

understanding in the secular world.

Hunter cites Dr. James Dobson, who is head of Focus on the Family as well as a professional psychologist, as an example of this melding of psychological beliefs into Christian moral education. As religious educators go, Dobson is quite orthodox. Pre-marital sex, for example, is a no-no. Nor does Dobson slight the traditional Christian teachings on marriage, fidelity, honesty and so on. But the very first reason Dobson offers for refraining from premarital sex is the risk of venereal disease, and he instructs adolescents that the primary task of their developing years is to acquire good self-esteem.

Another popular evangelical writer, Kenneth Erickson, is even more in sync with popular psychology. While emphasizing God's love, Erickson focuses most of his attention on building self-esteem, understanding one's "inner child" and eschewing "perfectionism and shame-based morality." Hunter explains, "While he writes of the importance of forgiveness, the problem of sin is all but absent."

The mainline churches go even further. Here's a United Church of Christ pamphlet for young people: "Loving myself is at the heart of living, loving, and growing. . . . To love oneself is holy." Mainline Presbyterians also reject "handing out absolutes," for these can be "a disservice to youth."

A rabbi at a large Reform congregation in Manhattan was asked whether theological concepts like sin are used to instruct the young. "Sin isn't one of our issues," he replied. "My guess is that in 12 years of religious school, our kids will never hear the word." (This means

that those children are never exposed to the Jewish prayer book, which asks forgiveness of sin *daily*, nor to the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, which are almost exclusively about sin and redemption.)

The principal of a Catholic school in San Antonio, Texas, expressed a similar view on sin: "Oh no, that kind of language would not relate to them anyway. When I was growing up, I personally might have responded to someone if they said, 'Hey this is a sin.' Today, though, I don't think that young people would respond to that. The most you could say to them is, 'That is not allowed.'"

There is no question that low self-esteem is associated with much pathology. But that insight has been ridden into the ground in modern America, to the point where building strong self-esteem has become a substitute for serious moral reasoning and self-examination. Religion used to teach introspection in order to instill humility. In our fear of low self-esteem, we seem to have tossed humility aside altogether.

The triumph of the therapeutic has left millions of Americans without the mental equipment to make moral choices. And when sin does rear its ugly head, our national response, both secular and religious, is to call in the shrinks.

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## NO 'DOONESBURY'

Garry Trudeau is on vacation. His "Doonesbury" cartoon will return Monday.