Is America Really Facing a Crisis of Values?

BY WAYNE E. BAKER

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...and judgment in God, religion and society. Today, however, the percentage of Americans holding a viewpoint that clearly delineates right from wrong has grown—despite the claims by many social critics that Americans are losing their capacity to make moral judgments. By 2000, 49.2 percent of Americans agreed with the statement: “There are absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. These always apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances.” About 46.6 percent agreed with the statement: “There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. What is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances.”

This rising tide of absolute values in America swept over all social classes, generations, men and women, whites and nonwhites, married and single. All these groups have become more absolutist over time. Compared to other nations, America has an unusually high proportion of absolutists. Only 17 of 79 nations have a higher proportion of absolutists, and all these are low-income and developing societies such as Morocco, Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, Chile and Peru. Most economically advanced democracies have many more citizens with a relative viewpoint than those who view the world in absolute terms. For example, more than 70 percent of the citizens of Denmark, Japan, the Netherlands and Sweden are relativists.

America’s Traditional Values

In addition to being one of the most traditional societies in the world, the United States is also one of the most religious, according to the World Values Survey, which tracks traditional and secular-rational values. Only 19 of 75 nations rate higher than the United States on a religiosity scale, and all these are poor or developing countries, such as Uganda, El Salvador, Iran, South Africa, Peru and Turkey. Numerically, Protestants are the largest group in America. According to a 2003 Gallup poll, 49.4 percent of Americans identify themselves as Protestants. Roman Catholics, at 23.7 percent, are the next-largest group. In the same poll, 60 percent of Protestants and 55 percent of Catholics answered “yes” to the statement that religion is “very important in your own life.” Protestants also attend church more frequently than Catholics. For Americans,
God, country and family are tightly connected. Americans, whether they are traditionalists or embrace secular-rational values that emphasize the right of personal choice, are among the world’s most patriotic.

In contrast, on a second cultural dimension examined by the World Values Survey, survival vs. self-expression, the United States continues to undergo rapid change. Survival values are held by people whose lives are characterized by uncertainty, insecurity, and political and economic turmoil. They emphasize economic and physical security above other goals, feel threatened by foreigners and diversity, and are distrustful and resist cultural change. Self-expression values, such as trust, tolerance and subjective well-being, emerge once material needs are satisfied, allowing post-industrial societies (like the United States) to move from survival mode to increased emphasis on self-expression and quality of life. Americans increasingly embrace self-expression values, which manifest themselves in rising environmental concerns, demands for equality, and the search for meaning and purpose in life beyond the mere consumption of goods and services.

America’s cultural heritage anchors the country in tradition, counteracts the secularizing effect of economic development that has caused most economically advanced nations to lose their traditional values, and promotes self-expression. America’s first immigrants, many of whom were religious exiles, brought to the New World strong religious beliefs, fierce independence, a preference for limited government and a distrust of formal authority. They were joined by independent-minded entrepreneurs. Together, the religious exiles and risk takers crafted a unique constellation of American values that continues to exert influence today.

The national cultures of most countries are based on a common ancestry, language, religion, history, customs and cultural traditions. In contrast, America has a set of shared ideas and values that overcomes differences in ancestry and ethnic origin, religion, customs and language.

What is perceived as a “crisis of values” in the United States really is a case of mistaken identity. Americans are unusual in that they cherish traditional values as well as a high degree of self-expression.

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The first chapter of America’s Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception is on Baker’s Web site, http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/wayneb. To contact Baker, send messages to wayneb@umich.edu.