

Is America Really Facing a Crisis of Values?

BY WAYNE E. BAKER

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Is this year's U.S. presidential race, fueled by attack ads and inflammatory rhetoric, another example of a nation in turmoil? Is the gap between conservatives and liberals, between religious Americans and those who eschew organized religion a sign that the country is in the throes of a culture war? Is there a crisis of values?

Contrary to the perception of pundits and the general public that the nation is becoming increasingly polarized, research shows that most Americans continue to hold and share the traditional values upon which the democracy was founded more than 200 years ago: firm beliefs in religion and God, family values, absolute moral authority, and national pride.

The Rising Tide of Absolutism

Americans have always tended to be moral absolutists, but this moral stance has strengthened in recent decades. According to findings from the World Values Surveys, two decades ago Americans' views of moral authority were more relative than absolute, 60 percent vs. 37 percent. Moral relativism locates the source of moral values and judgment in the self, while moral absolutism locates the source of moral values

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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

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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,

INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL

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

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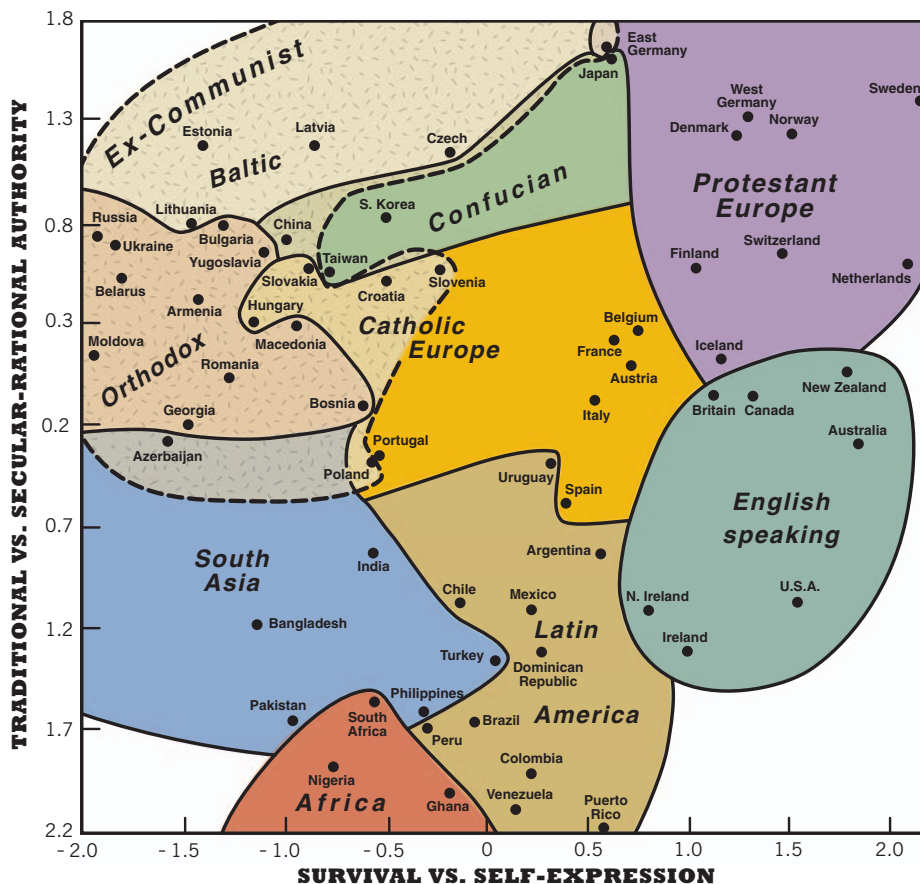
the United States) to move from survival mode to increased emphasis on self-expression and quality of life. Americans increasingly embrace self-expression values, which manifest themselves in rising environmental concerns, demands for equality, and the search for meaning and purpose in life beyond the 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

LOCATIONS OF 65 SOCIETIES ON TWO DIMENSIONS OF CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATION

World Values Surveys, 1990–1991 and 1995–1998



SOURCE: "MODERNIZATION, CULTURAL CHANGE, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF TRADITIONAL VALUES" BY RONALD INGLEHART AND WAYNE E. BAKER; *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW*, 2000, VOL. 65 (FEBRUARY:19-51)

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. Even the current debate about values, framed by presidential election politics, serves an important rhetorical function. Repeated warnings, public alarm and political and intellectual debates about the loss of traditional values or a crisis of values remind Americans of the ideals that undergird the nation. These debates also affirm and reinforce the ideological core of the nation's sense of community—the values that define who we are. Such rhetoric is a forceful

reminder of America's traditional values—alongside the symbols of these values, such as "In God We Trust" on U.S. currency, the U.S. Supreme Court invocation that includes "God save the United States and this honorable court" and the "Pledge of Allegiance" recited daily in schools across the country.

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.