



Walking Out on Christianity: A New Trend?

By Bob Waldrep



A decade ago, Anne Rice, who gained prominence for her bestselling novels, *The Vampire Chronicles*, walked away from atheism to rejoin the

faith of her youth, Roman Catholicism. Though, not necessarily due to her decision, her writing also turned from vampires to a planned series of novels about the life of Christ.

Last month Rice took another walk; walking away from Christianity. On July 28, she announced this decision on her **Facebook page** stating, "Today, I quit being a Christian". With more than 100,000 people following her on **Facebook**, it quickly became a topic of discussion even drawing the attention of the national media. Naturally, it also became the subject of numerous opinion pieces and blogs.

Why did she leave? She said she did it in the name of Christ, writing, "I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life."

Rice was not leaving, however, because of Christ. She made a carefully worded distinction between being a Christian and being part of Christianity; or, perhaps better stated, the visible representative of Christianity - the Church. On this point she wrote, "I remain committed to Christ as always, but not to being Christian or to being part of Christianity"; which she went on to identify as a

"...quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group".

Not a very flattering assessment of the Church. Sides were drawn. The debate began. The devout and not so devout took their perspective of her announcement to the airwaves, blogs, and op-ed pages.

For some it was viewed as a monumental move towards dragging the Church out of the "moral dark ages". For others, it was proof-positive of the collapse of our culture, and/or that Rice was not now, nor could she have ever been, a Christian. Even some atheists jumped into the fray arguing she didn't go far enough in her renunciation of Christianity.

Rice will no longer give interviews on the matter; yet, weeks later it continued to be a topic regularly referred to on her Facebook page. What is it about this story that has resonated with so many people and moved so many of them to become involved in the discussion? While it may simply be the result of her celebrity status, it is more likely due to the fact she has expressed some quite commonly held views about the Church today.

Consider four areas of concern expressed by Rice, and the data regarding each as presented in the Pew Forum's extensive **2008 Report on Americans' Religious Beliefs** and practice (Her objections are primarily related to her experience as part of the Catholic Church, but the data indicates many Protestants share her same concerns):

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Homosexuality

One reason Rice stated she was leaving Christianity is because she refuses to be anti-gay, inferring that the Church opposes homosexuality. Obviously, rejecting homosexuality would be a difficult position for Rice since she has a son who is openly gay. But, even beyond that, her views on this issue are actually becoming increasingly mainstreamed among those who identify themselves with Christianity.

The majority of those who consider themselves part of Christianity still reject homosexuality; however, the Pew Report found, 38% of Protestants and 26% of evangelicals believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society. This compares with 50% of the total population and 58% of Rice's former Church, Catholicism.

Abortion

In her statement Rice did not explain what she meant by refusing to be anti-feminist. However, in interviews subsequent to issuing her statement she expressed her view that radical feminism has accomplished much in advancing women's rights and it should not be reduced to simply a battle over reproductive rights, the right to abortion.

Concerning that battle, the Pew report found 45% of Protestants, 33% of Evangelicals, and 48% of Catholics now believe abortion should be legal in most, or all cases. While Rice personally opposes abortion, (thus her statement she refuses to be anti-life) she is very much in line with those who believe it should be legal.

Political Parties

Rice's declaration that she refuses to be anti-Democrat, obviously reflects a belief that Christianity expects adherents to be Republicans, or against Democrats. It is safe to say that many would agree with Rice's assessment as Chris-

tians aligned with the Republican party seem to have been much more vocal about their faith; particularly as it relates to their political activism.

Interestingly, however, among those aligned with Christianity, when it comes to identifying with a political party, the numbers are fairly even. Among Protestants, 42% identify themselves as leaning toward Republican and 45% toward Democrat. Among evangelicals the numbers are 50% Republican and 34% Democrat. Among Rice's own Catholic Church, 33% lean Republican and 48% Democrat.

Science

While Rice does not explain her statement refusing to be anti-science, she most likely refers to support for evolution since this is probably the biggest debate involving the scientific community and the Church, today. And,

"[Christianity is a] quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly Infamous group."

Anne Rice, on leaving the Church



while the majority of those identified with Christianity support creationism, it is a shrinking number. Pew found that 35% of Protestants believe evolution is the best explanation for the origin of human life. 23% of evangelicals hold this view, and 58% of Catholics, which is even greater than the 48% of the total population that embrace evolution.

Whether Rice's assessments regarding the Church are correct, or not, as the data indicates, hers is not a view simply held by some small fringe group who identify with the Christian Church.

Rather, they are reflective of a growing cultural voice. And like Rice, many of these are choosing to simply walk away from "Christianity".

Recent polling by Barna found that she is one of about 60 million adults (about 24% of the population) who have, at some point in life, changed faith traditions (this does not include Protestants changing denominations). The largest shift was self-identifying Christians to atheism or agnosticism (12%).

The list of reasons respondents gave for changing sound very much like those of Rice. They include, "...feeling disillusioned with church and religion; feeling the church is hypocritical; having negative experiences in churches; being in disagreement with Christianity about specific issues such as homosexuality, abortion or birth control; [and] feeling the church is too authoritarian.

Though certainly not identified with mainstream Christianity, *Miami Herald* columnist, Leonard Pitts, Jr. clearly understands this is a much bigger issue than just Anne Rice. Shortly after her announcement he argued that there is a segment of society, "...who seek a magnificent faith that commits and compels, and [yet] finds churches offering only a shriveled faith that marginalizes and demeans". He then offers his opinion that, "...organized religion's response to those people, those 'seekers', will determine its future."

Perhaps, Pitts is right. Rather than focusing the discussion on Anne Rice, maybe the Church would be better served if Christians took time to consider the objections she has raised and, instead of arguing over whether or not they are valid, begin to address them in a Christ-like manner. After all, she is not the only one raising these issues.



To do this will certainly present a dilemma for the Church. Can the Church reach out to those "seekers" while avoiding the temptation to do so by compromising its historical and, more importantly, biblically held beliefs and practices? Without question, the road of compromise is much more easily traveled and the path which culture cries out for us to take; but, is it the way of Christ?

While the polling reflects great diversity of belief and practice among those who call themselves Christian, we must remember that truth is not determined by polling. There must be a standard to which we all are held accountable. For those who call themselves Christians, the Bible is undeniably that standard.

Even Rice, in withdrawing from the community of Christians, acknowledged in interviews that she will continue her habit of reading the Scripture

each day to find direction and answers. However, she said she is tired of the fighting among Christians about how it must be interpreted and what is right and wrong.

Frankly, I can understand this. I also get tired of the fighting among Christians; oftentimes about theological positions that have little bearing, if any, in the grand scheme of the gospel. And, yes, I agree with her that at times we Christians - the Church - are a "quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group". However, at such times I must remember it is a group that Christ passionately loves and gave his life for.

However, that doesn't give us a free pass to act any way we want towards those with whom we disagree. In fact, it should give us a greater sense of responsibility to be more like Christ and to conduct ourselves with Christian charity. Our conversations should be

seasoned with grace and expressed in love and concern and our actions filled with compassion, without compromising the truth.

Pitts ended his opinion piece by saying, "It might behoove keepers of the faith to keep in mind the distinction Anne Rice drew in her farewell: Christ didn't fail her ...Christianity did."

Perhaps it did. And if so, hopefully, what Mrs. Rice is expressing is the realization that her hope cannot be placed in institutional religion but only in the person of Christ. If that is what she means then she has found what the Church truly is - the Bride of Christ, blemished and tarnished though it may be.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We love to hear from our readers. Mail, or email, us your thoughts and opinions on this and other topics of concern in today's culture. Even if it's the same as ours we would appreciate knowing what you think.



Culture Tracks

Statistical data reflecting the cultural footprints of Americans.



FOLLOWING IS THE STATISTICAL DATA IN THE "LEAVING CHRISTIANITY" ARTICLE

Homosexuality

- 50% of those polled believe homosexuality should be accepted by society
- 38% of Protestants believe this
- 26% of Evangelicals, and
- 58% of Catholics

Abortion

- 51% of those polled believe abortion should be legal in most, or all cases.
- 45% of Protestants, believe this
- 33% of Evangelicals, and
- 48% of Catholics

Political Affiliation

- Protestants: 42% lean toward Republican; 45% toward Democrat
- Evangelicals: 50% lean Republican and 34% Democrat
- Catholic: 33% lean Republican and 48% Democrat

Evolution

- 48% of the population believe evolution is the best explanation for the origin of human life
- 35% of Protestants believe this
- 23% of evangelicals hold this view, and
- 58% of Catholics

24% of the population has, at some point in life, changed faith traditions. Largest shift—self-identifying Christians to atheism or agnosticism (12%).

Statistical data from The Pew Foundation and Barna Research



Crosswinds Romania



Recently, Ieremia shared the events of a typical weekend for him. It included preaching in his own Church, Agape Christian Church of Ploiesti and then leaving to cross the Carpathians Mountains to participate in the funeral of another elder/pastor. Afterwards it was off to another church to preach and then a late night return to Ploiesti.



Ieremia Speaking at Tent Meeting

Besides the “usual activities”, Ieremia reports they also started the summer activities: camps, summer seminar, etc. An example of a summer activity is the tent evangelization. This takes place in one location from Monday to Wednesday and then

moves to another location from Thursday through Sunday.

During the mornings, the young Christians do activities with children. The parents, who are not believers, are glad that someone takes care of their children for a few days, because they are on vacation. During the evenings, evangelistic meetings are organized for the parents. The children bring their parents and grandparents to these meetings where they hear about Jesus Christ and salvation through faith in Him.

Over in Western Romania, Nelu has also been conducting youth camps where he holds seminars for the youth about being different in a secular world. He reports these seminars are very well received and impacting.

Nelu also continues to travel throughout Romania speaking at various Churches. At the end of this month he will also spend three days teaching in Sweden.

If you have a question about Romania, or the ministry of Ieremia and Nelu, they would welcome your email. They can be reached at:

Ieremia@crosswindsfoundation.org
Nelu@crosswindsfoundation.org

Are Thai's truly Buddhists? By Dwight Martin

The average Thai would answer, "To be Thai is to be Buddhist." But what has surprised many missionaries is that Thai Buddhism is actually a syncretistic mix of animism, Buddhism and other religions. While the external manifestations of Buddhism are highly visible around the country (temples, monks walking in the morning, celebration of holy days), in reality, much of the actual practices follow animistic tradition.



Buddhist Spirit House

For the average Thai, Buddhism and its practices deal primarily with the questions of death and the hereafter. Animistic practices address the issues of the here and now. The result is what is called "Folk Buddhism". If Buddha could come back and discover what his followers truly believe he would be appalled because it is contradictory to his teachings.

Ironically, our Buddhist Thai friends understand this, yet it doesn't bother them. They know Buddha taught there are no spirits or demons, but they also know from experience they do exist and that is what controls their lives. They live in daily fear of them and continually try to appease them.

For those in the west considering Buddhism as the answer to life's questions, what they haven't yet realized is they will never find it in Buddhism. As much as Buddha tried to deny the reality of the spiritual realm, it does exist! And, as Thai people have found out, this void will get filled one way or another.



Dwight and Mary Kay Martin

Our prayer for those both in the west and in Thailand is that they will find life's questions answered by the God of the Bible.



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