

Americans See Room to Disagree but Remain Faithful to Religion

WASHINGTON (RNS) Significant majorities of Americans say it is possible to disagree with their religion's teachings on abortion and homosexuality and still remain in good standing with their faith.

The findings, released Thursday (June 9) in a detailed survey by Public Religion Research Institute, held true for major religious groups, including Catholics and white evangelical Protestants.

The findings reflect the complicated tasks faced by Catholic bishops to discipline politicians who stray from church teaching, or evangelical groups that try to toe a traditional line as cultural values shift around them.

In fact, the survey found that six in 10 Americans chafe at the idea of religious leaders publicly pressuring politicians on the issue of abortion, as has happened to several high-profile Catholic Democrats in recent years.

Overall, 72 percent of Americans say it's permissible to disagree with church teaching on abortion, and 63 percent say the same for homosexuality.

Catholics closely mirror the general population's position on abortion and church teaching, but are more progressive than the general population on the issue of homosexuality and church teaching.

Two-thirds of evangelicals (67 percent) said they could differ with church teaching on abortion, and slightly less than a majority (47 percent) said the same about homosexuality.

The report focused on the views of millennials (people ages 18-29) and found that they are more supportive than their parents of gay marriage. Their views on abortion closely mirror their parents, however, with six in 10 saying abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Also, most millennials—68 percent—think at least some health care professionals in their community should provide legal abortions.

“Millennials are actually more likely to say that abortion should be available in

their local community than say it should be legal,” said Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Washington-based research firm, which announced its results at the Brookings Institution.

Abortion services by local health care professionals is also supported by majorities of white mainline Protestants (72 percent), the religiously unaffiliated (71 percent), white Catholics (58 percent), and black Protestants (56 percent). Minorities of Latino Catholics (38 percent) and white evangelicals (37 percent) supported such availability.

The report also found a religious divide on the sinfulness of having an abortion, with more than 60 percent of white evangelicals, black Protestants and Latino Catholics seeing it as sinful. White Catholics, meanwhile, were evenly divided (46 percent each), and white mainline Protestants were the sole major religious group where a majority (55 percent) did not believe it is sinful.

Researchers found a link between biblical interpretation and opposition to abortion: almost six in 10 Americans who say the Bible is the literal word of God believe abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.

More than 80 percent of people who don't see the Bible as the word of God but rather a book written by men think abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances.

The overall survey, based on telephone interviews with 3,000 people between April 22 and May 8, had a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points. The sample of 431 millennials had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.5 percentage points.

Among other findings:

- Significant majorities of mainline Protestants (85 percent), Catholics (78 percent), black Protestants (74 percent) and evangelicals (62 percent) support public schools teaching comprehensive sex education.

- With the exception of white evangelicals, majorities of major religious groups say “pro-life” and “pro-choice” are both labels that describe them at least somewhat well.

- Majorities of Americans who attend church at least once or twice a week hear

clergy talk about abortion and homosexuality, with most hearing those issues are morally wrong and few hearing they are morally acceptable.