

Facile Reporting

The supposed decline in biblical literalism

By Otis Dudley Duncan

In 2000, excited commentaries on the supposed decline in biblical literalism began appearing in the media. They were issued by such parties as a seasoned Associated Press religion reporter, an anonymous writer for *Answers in Genesis* (a web site), a spokesperson for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the president of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars, and Paul Kurtz, the dean of American humanism, who exulted: "Bravo! Secularism Growing in the US," in his magazine, *Free Inquiry*.

The first three of these can be traced to *Surveying the Religious Landscape*, a 1999 book by George Gallup Jr. and D. Michael Lindsey. "As recently as 1963," Gallup and Lindsey reported, "two persons in three viewed the Bible as the actual word of God, to be taken literally, word for word. Today only one person in three holds to that interpretation."

The other two commentaries referred to a Gallup Poll finding for February 2001, to wit, 27% held the literalist view, as compared to 33% as recently as June 1998.

But what if the evidence for the earlier drastic decline is shaky, and what if the recent decline is not confirmed by other evidence? Maybe the concern or the rejoicing of the commentators is misplaced. I will examine that evidence in gory detail; as in all such matters, the devil is in the details.

Otis Dudley Duncan is a retired sociologist/statistician who lives in Santa Barbara, California.



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The documentation for the 1963 Gallup figure is sparse. The June-July 1982 special issue of the Gallup Report entitled *Religion in America* presented figures pertaining to the following question (hereafter called the standard Gallup question):

Which one of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word. The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word. The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by men.

"This question," the report stated "was first asked 20 years ago, showing a sharp decline between 1963 and 1978 in the proportion of Biblical 'literalists.'" This assertion was accompanied by a table in which the proportions accepting the first alternative ("actual word") were given as 65% in 1963, 38% in 1978, and 37% in 1982.

But there was no reference to any earlier report containing the 1963 figure. It is not listed in the cumulative index to the Gallup Poll for 1935-1997, nor in the earlier 3-volume book, *The Gallup Poll, 1935-1971*. It does not appear in the Roper Center's iPOLL database; and the staff of the Gallup Organization's "Brain" archives is unable to supply any documentation.

Furthermore, the drastic decline between 1963 and 1978 reported by Gallup was not paralleled by findings of the National Election Study (NES), which used a somewhat different question:

Here are four statements about the Bible, and I'd like you to tell me which is closest to your own view. The Bible is God's word and all it says is true. The Bible was written by men inspired by God, but it contains some human errors. The Bible is a good book because it was written by wise men, but God had nothing to do with it. The Bible was written

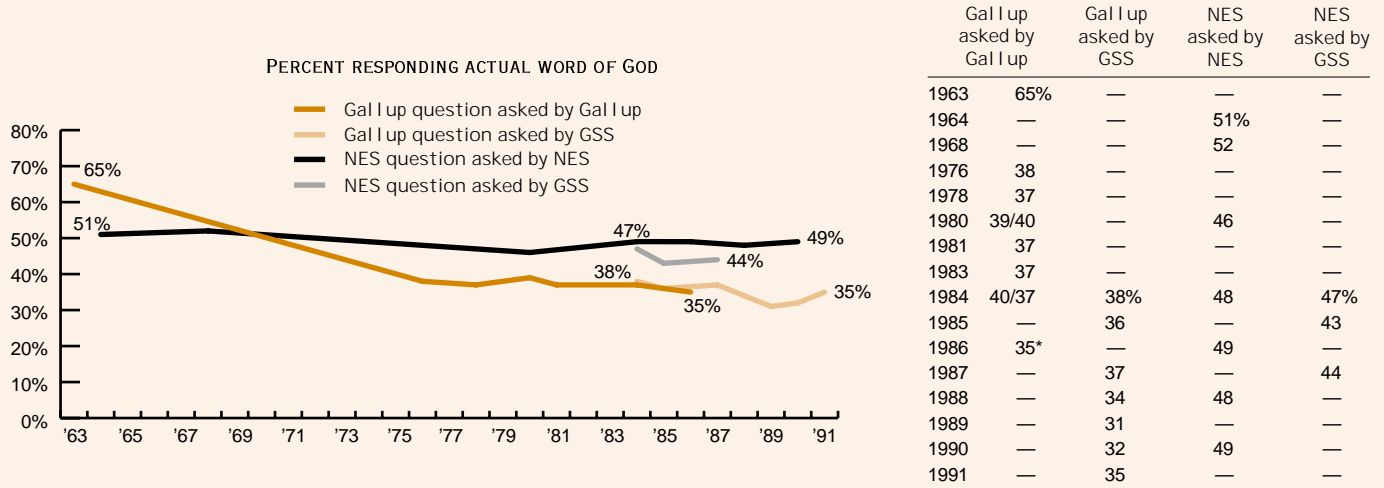
Figure 1

NES Question Shows No Literalist Decline

Questions:

Gallup standard wording: Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your views about the Bible—the Bible is the actual word of God and is to taken literally, word for word; the Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally; or the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men?

NES wording: Here are four statements about the Bible and I'd like you to tell me which is closest to your own view—the Bible is God's word and all it says is true; the Bible was written by men inspired by God, but it contains some human errors; the Bible is a good book because it was written by wise men, but God had nothing to do with it; [or] the Bible was written by men who lived so long ago that it is worth very little today.



* ABC News/ Washington Post poll

Note: Only those years in which the NES question was used roughly contemporaneously with polls using the Gallup question are shown.

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey, the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan (NES), and ABC News/ Washington Post.

by men who lived so long ago that it is worth very little today.

The NES wording was also used in the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey (GSS) in three years in which a split ballot design permitted a comparison of the percentages obtained with the Gallup question and the NES question.

The main point here is that the striking decrease between 1963 and 1976 in the Gallup series is not reflected in the NES data for 1964 to 1968 or 1980 (see Figure 1). The entries for the subsequent years indicate that the NES question regularly gets a higher proportion of literalist responses than the Gallup question. This contrast is evident not only in the three split ballot readings by GSS but also in comparing both of the series using the NES wording with the Gallup figures. What may seem like fairly modest variations in

question wording may produce statistically significant differences in results.

I am tempted to bracket the 1963 Gallup figure as possibly a ringer. Perhaps it was obtained in a special study that never found its way into the Gallup archives, but was pulled up for the discussion in the 1982 report and erroneously assumed to refer to what later became the standard Gallup question. With this number erased, there is very little indication of a trend, upward or downward, over the period from the middle '60s through the late '80s.

So much for the decline of biblical literalism in the earlier period. What about the decline supposed to have taken place in more recent years?

In Figure 2 we have an extraordinary record of results obtained by three survey organizations, all using the standard Gallup question. The Gallup and

GSS series could perhaps be regarded as giving essentially the same indication of a downward trend after about 1991. Quite a different story is told by surveys conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* however.

Up to 1992 the three series could be regarded as reasonably consistent (making generous allowances for sampling variation). But thereafter, the *Times* poll simply does not pick up the decline indicated by Gallup and the GSS. The curves in Figure 3 represent my sense of what the eye picks out at the trajectory of each series. [A mathematical formula was used to produce the smooth curves in the figure, but the math has no authority. Most emphatically, it has no validity for purposes of prediction.]

The secondary evidence laid out in Figure 4 does not resolve the dilemma but only points it up. The variant of the Gallup wording in-

cluded in the figure is actually the same as the standard Gallup wording, except that the third alternative reads, "The Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God." The wording of the first alternative, the literalist response, is the same. All of the percentages in Figure 4 showing the literalist response are 35 or higher, as are 18 of the 22 *LA Times* readings shown in Figure 2. By contrast, none of the Gallup and only one of the GSS percentages shown in Figure 2 reaches as high as 35 after 1987.

The NES series in Figure 4 is of special interest, as it is the only one produced by a single survey organization. One could perhaps discern a slight downward trend here. (But the lower level of literalism shown in these surveys as compared with those in Figure 1

Figure 2
After 1992, a Different Story Told by *LA Times*

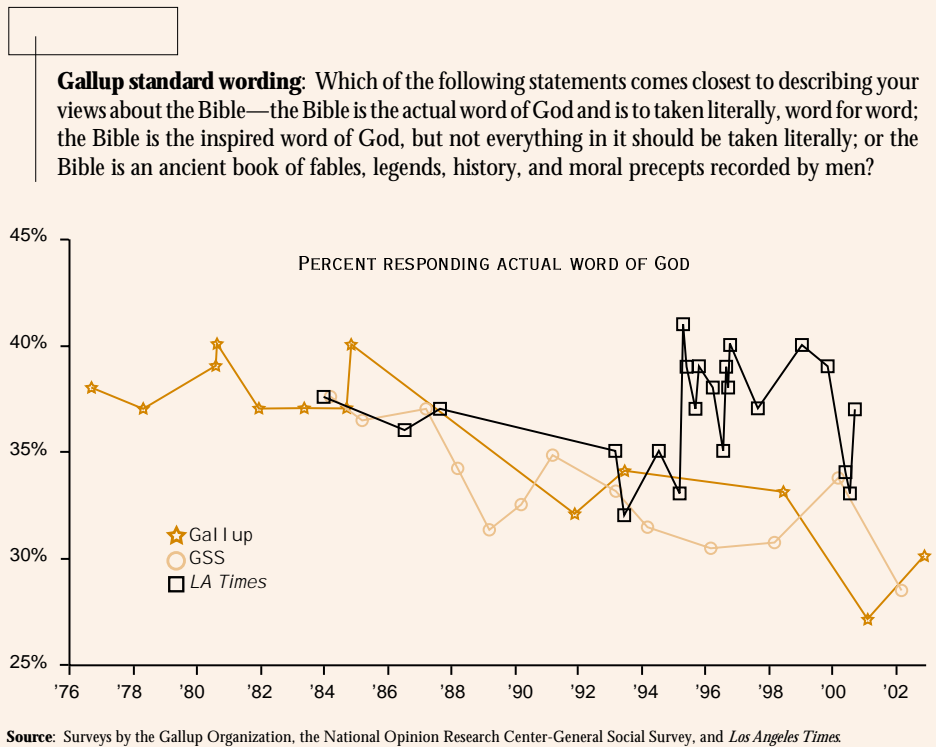
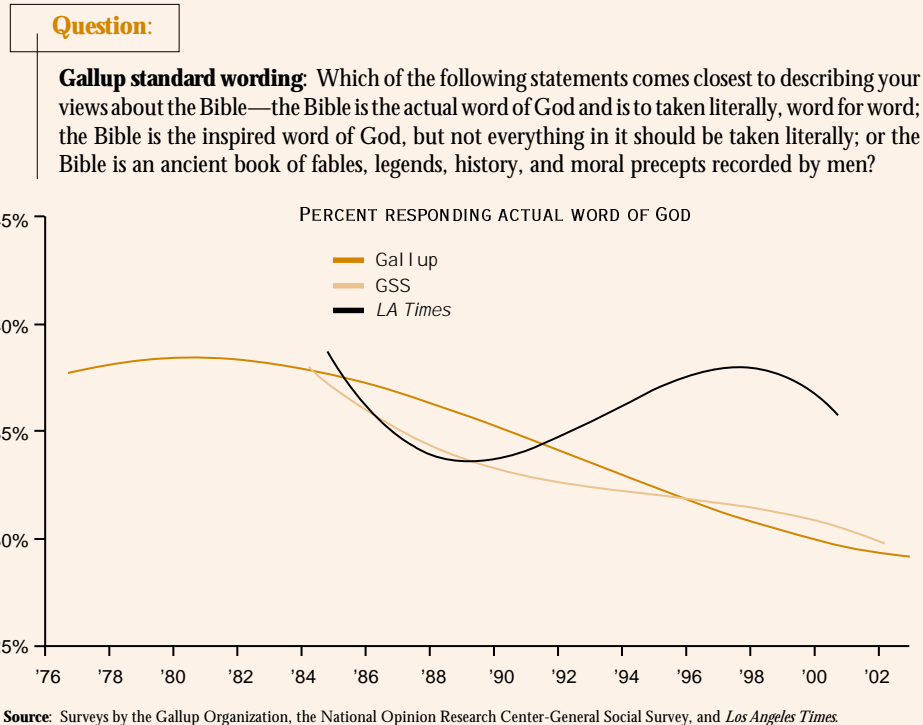


Figure 3
Differing Trajectories



should not be regarded as indicating a trend, in view of the change in question used in NES between the earlier and later periods.)

Finally, the collection of readings other than NES where the variant wording was used gives no suggestion of a downward trend.

In any further study of the alleged decline of biblical literalism in the United States, the primary emphasis should be on replication of the Gallup standard question, since it provides our longest and most voluminous series of readings. But it would be illuminating to see repetitions of the (earlier) NES wording in 2003 and beyond. And it would be especially useful to follow the GSS precedent of creating split ballot comparisons of the Gallup and NES questions.

An even better study design than the split ballot would be to ask two different questions of the same sample of respondents, separating them in the interview by a number of intervening questions on other topics and randomizing the order of the two in the interview. This is what we require in order to test whether the two questions are actually measuring the same thing even if one gets more literalist responses than the other, just as two questions on a math exam could both be measuring achievement in that subject even though one is harder than the other.

And if the experiment is repeated after a lapse of time, the two questions should both register any trend, albeit not necessarily agreeing as to its rate of change.

But any documented report on a well-formulated question is a down payment on the cost of measuring a trend. A case in point is the earliest question on biblicism I have found. In a June 1952 poll conducted by Ben Gaffin and Associates,

respondents were asked, “Do you believe the Bible is really the revealed word of God, or do you think it is only a great piece of literature?” The same wording was used by the Gallup Organization during November 1965.

The alternative “word of God” was chosen by 83% of respondents in the earlier survey, and 79% in the later. I strongly urge Gallup and other organizations to repeat this question. Such replications would provide a better basis than the questionable 1963 Gallup result for inferring long-term change.

I have found another eleven questions that merit consideration as baseline measures for future trend assessments. Some look like pretty good proxies for the standard Gallup question, and others clearly get at biblicism in a different way than questions about literalism *per se*. As would be expected because of the striking differences in wording, there is a wide range, 30 to 70%, in the percentages selecting the biblicist response. It would be especially interesting to com-

pare the 1993 finding that 70% “believe the Bible is the infallible word of God” with results for this question today.

Although no one doubts that biblical literalism has declined somewhat over the very long run since, say, 1900, there is only equivocal evidence for a dramatic drop in either the late 1960s or early years of the new millennium.

But my superficial reconnaissance should be followed by a formal meta-analysis going beyond the readily available marginal response frequencies. And the time is ripe for more ambitious studies using multiple criteria of literalism and, more broadly, biblicism and bibliolatry, taking advantage of the very considerable experimentation with alternative question wordings now recorded in the archives.

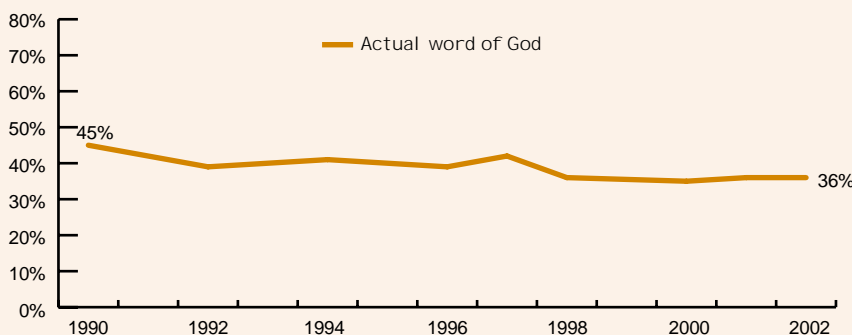
These suggestions presuppose, however, that the trend in biblical literalism merits serious study, not facile reporting.

Figure 4
Flat Line in the '90s

Questions:

Gallup standard wording: Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your views about the Bible—the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; the Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally; or the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men?

Variant wording: Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible—the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; the Bible is the word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; [or] the Bible is a book written by men and is not the word of God?



Year	Gallup wording (%)	Variant wording (%)
1990	—	45%
1992	—	39
1994	—	41
1996	—	39
1997	42%	—
1998	36	36
2000	—	35
2001	—	36
2002	—	36

Source: Surveys by ABC News, 1997; *Washington Post*, 1998; NES 1990-96, 1998, 2000; Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2001; Harris/TimeCNN, 2002.