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### December 10. 2009: The New Weirdness

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Title: The New Weirdness

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12/10/2009—Yesterday the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported a poll showing that Americans now freely mix all sorts of religious beliefs. (Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths). Around a quarter of the population say they believe in reincarnation and astrology and 30% “have felt in touch with someone who has already died.” Perhaps most surprising is the report in the poll of intense religious experiences, despite rapid secularization in American life. In 1962, in answer to Gallup poll question whether the subject has ever had a religious or mystical experience, defined as a “moment of sudden religious insight or awakening”, 78% answered “no” and only 22% answered “yes”. Yet, when the Pew organization repeated the question in December 2009, nearly half of Americans—49%--answered “yes”. That is a remarkable change. Even among those unaffiliated with any religion, the “yes” response was 30%. The New Atheists, people like Christopher Hitchens, would consider all of this to represent a decline in rationality. I am not certain I would put it that way. I think what is happening is that with the decline in authoritative religious institutions, people are freer to experiment religiously. Unfortunately, they are also freer to latch on to what used to be called “enthusiasms”. Perhaps there is some truth in the warning attributed to G.K. Chesterton: “When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing — they believe in anything.” In any event, it is going to be hard to blame this on organized religion. I am sure that ministers, priests, rabbis and imams were horrified at the report. The report shows that religion is not the source of irrationality in American life. But I'm not sure what is.