

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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21st Century America and Religion: The Secularization of America?

Whatever your view of the role biblical Christianity played in the founding of America, intellectual honesty demands that one recognize that religion, religious values and specifically Christianity have all played a defining role in the development of American civilization. For example, you simply cannot understand the colonial American decision to seek independence from Great Britain without understanding the First Great Awakening. You cannot understand Abolitionism without coming to terms with the Second Great Awakening. The Laymen's Prayer Revival of 1857-1858 played a strategic role in pre-Civil War religiosity in the urban areas of America—and on into post-Civil War America. The temperance movement in America, the women's suffrage movement, the Civil Rights movement, and many other American reform movements all owe their respective origins and development to Christianity. Finally, the religious revival of the 1950s played a critically important role in defining America's response to atheistic communism centered in the USSR and China. Whether one agrees with all of these various American developments or not, biblical Christianity was central in explaining each one of them. But there is growing evidence that that central role of biblical Christianity no longer exists in America. Is America becoming increasingly secular, with little or no religious influence in ethical, social, economic or political decision-making?

Most people who follow such things are familiar with the recent Pew Research Center's study that indicated the growth of the religious preference called "none." In the 1950s that number was about 2%; in the 1970s that number was about 7%; today it is about 20%! All regions of the nation indicate growth in the "nones," but its growth is especially pronounced among whites, the young and among men. To be more specific, about 30% of this 20% (i.e., about 6% of the American public) consider themselves atheists or agnostics. The remaining consider themselves indifferent to religion. As the columnist Michael Gerson argues, "Though the nones are varied, and occasionally confused, their overall growth has been swift and unprecedented. This has occasioned scholarly disagreement over the causes. Clearly, the social stigma against being religiously unaffiliated has faded . . . the decline of religious conformity is itself a major social development, requiring some explanation."

How do we explain this significant shift in America? One rather compelling theory centers on the religious right. This explanation is somewhat important because the increase of the "nones" correlates perfectly with the rise of the religious right. Some research seems to indicate that the "nones" view the religious right as only interested in money, rigorous rules and politics. Names such as Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell are not well accepted among the "nones." But, as Gerson also shows, explaining the rise of the "nones" is much more complicated. For example, "declining trust in religious institutions since the 1990s has been accompanied by declining trust in most institutions (with the notable exception of the military). Confidence in government and big business has simultaneously fallen—and the public standing of both is lower

than that of the church. Americans may be less affiliated with religious organizations because they have grown generally more individualistic and skeptical of authority.”

The same Pew study that identified the “rise of the nones” has also confirmed another important statistic—58% of Americans still describe religion as “very important” in their lives. Similar statistics demonstrate that prayer plays an important role in 58% of American lives. Therefore, it would be difficult to argue that America is becoming more of a secular nation. What has changed quite poignantly is America’s commitment to institutional religious movements. Gerson quotes Luis Lugo of the Pew Center, who argues that “what we are seeing is not secularization but polarization.” Institutional religions have gained a large and growing body of critics. Gerson reports that this trend is specifically beneficial to cultural liberalism and the Democratic Party. For example, 70% of the “nones” voted for President Obama. On volatile issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage and broader issues of sexuality, the “nones” are much more liberal. Indeed, “nones” are now the largest religious category in the Democratic coalition, comprising 24% of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters. [The other major block in the Democratic coalition are black Protestants—one of the most religious groups in America. Can the secular “nones” coexist with the very religious black Protestants?]

There are other major implications associated with the rise of the “nones.” Gerson shows that “religious conservatives remain the largest constituency within the Republican Party. So America is moving in the direction of having one secular party and one religious party, bringing polarization to a new level of intensity. This *is* movement in the direction of Europe, which has been cursed by the conflict between anticlerical parties and religious parties. For America, this could be a dangerous source of social division, with each side viewing the other as theocrats or pagans. There is no contempt like the contempt of the true believer or the militant skeptic.” Gerson maintains that the rise of the “nones” has other rather profound implications: Marriage is an important cultural institution and marriage is on the decline among the “nones.” The unaffiliated also donate less to charity and participate in fewer volunteer organizations. Hence, “individualism can easily become atomization.”

One final thought: This increasing polarization is spilling over into public policy and other areas of American life.

1. For example, as a result of President Obama’s Health Care law, the US government has defined two classes of religious organizations, two kinds of religion and two degrees of religious freedom. Church, being inwardly oriented, gets an exemption—full protection for their convictions and practices. All other religious organizations, being outwardly oriented on service and not inwardly on worship, are not exercising pure religion, and thus merit only a lesser degree of religious freedom—an “accommodation.” This of course was at the center of the recent controversy over the contraceptive mandate under the health care law. Dan Busby of ECFA argues that “[T]he[se] deeply troubling contemporary trends [are] for laws and regulations themselves to be less accommodating of religion, and constitutional interpretive schemes to prioritize other values over religious freedom. If these trends continue, then fewer religion-accommodating rules will be allowed to stand, and then fewer court decisions will end up favorable to religious exercise by individuals or institutions.” In other words, due this increased polarization,

religious freedom and “free exercise” protections deeply rooted in the Constitution and in America’s history may be in jeopardy.

2. Consider a recent case at Johns Hopkins. The Inclusion Statement at the University reads that it is “committed to sharing values of diversity and inclusion . . . by recruiting and retaining a diverse group of students.” The University also has an Office of Institutional Equity and a “Diversity Leadership Council,” which defines “inclusion” as “active, thoughtful and ongoing engagement with each other.” However, the Hopkins’s Student Government Association (SGA) has denied Voice for Life (VFL) the status of a recognized student group because its website includes images of aborted babies and because it engages in “sidewalk counseling” outside of abortion clinics. The SGA says that VFL is guilty of “harassment.” Columnist George Will correctly argues, “Suppose such SGA-recognized student groups as the Arab Students Organization, the Black Student Union, the Hopkins Feminists or the Diverse Sexuality and Gender Alliance were to link their websites to provocative outside organizations or were to counsel persons not to patronize firms with policies those groups oppose. Would the SGA want to deny them recognition as student groups? Of course not.” Academic institutions are committed to diversity in every way but thought. Apparently at Johns Hopkins, it is impossible to have a reasoned debate on the ethics of abortion. One SGA member said that pro-life demonstrations make her feel “personally violated, targeted and attacked at a place where we previously felt safe and free to live our lives.” Academic institutions practice academic freedom, presumably, and students frequently encounter ideas they do not share. That is the whole point of developing critical thinking and is at the heart of academic freedom—in every area, apparently, except abortion. Those who hold deep religious convictions about the value of prenatal life have no voice at Johns Hopkins, apparently a prestigious institution of higher learning that values academic freedom and the free engagement of all ideas—except of course with those who hold to the infinite value of prenatal life. That is not academic freedom and that is not the free engagement of ideas. There is another word for that—hypocrisy!

See Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (1 and 3 April 2013); ECFA’s “Focus on Accountability,” (First Quarter 2013); and George Will in the *Washington Post* (8 April 2013).