

PUBLIC WAS RIGHT ABOUT MORALITY SLIPPING

[Bill Donohue](#)

In 1998, a Gallup poll asked respondents if they thought the state of moral values would be better or worse in 2025. It found that 62 percent predicted it would be worse. Were they right? The data show they were.

In 2022, a Gallup poll found that “a record-high 50 percent of Americans rated the overall state of moral values as ‘poor,’ and another 37 percent said it was ‘only fair.’ The public was pessimistic about the future: 78 percent say morals are getting worse.” But why? Consider the results of a 2024 survey by Pew Research Center.

It found that 80 percent of Americans say that religion’s role in American life is shrinking, and most concluded that it was not a good thing. This is significant given that this was the highest percentage ever recorded in a Pew survey on this issue. It was also found that 57 percent of Americans expressed a positive view of religion’s influence in American life.

To summarize, the public predicted more than a quarter century ago that the moral state of affairs would trend south, and subsequently they have been proven right. Moreover, they identified the decreasing role of religion as an important source of that decline. So where does that leave us?

We learned a few months ago from a Gallup poll that Americans are divided on what is considered moral. It cuts primarily along religious-secular lines. For example, Democrats and young people tend to be secularists, and they prize animal rights over the rights of unborn human babies. Those who are religious—they tend to be Republicans and older people—sharply

disagree with them.

A Pew survey taken around the same time last year, found that the more religious a person is, the more likely he is to say there are “clear and absolute standards for what is right and wrong.” On the other hand, secularists are moral relativists, sizing up moral issues on the basis of their own moral compass.

Now it makes sense that if one rejects the idea that there are absolute standards for what is right and wrong, e.g. as found in the Ten Commandments, then the natural guide to moral issues is one’s own conscience. The problem with that view is that every genocidal maniac and serial rapist who ever lived also had a conscience, so on what basis can moral relativists say they are wrong? Religious folks have no such dilemma.

To be sure, there are religious people who hold to clear moral standards who are extremists, and many are hypocrites. But to judge the efficacy of any ethical standard as exercised by extremists is obviously a non-starter—it makes as much sense as judging those on a diet by those who are starving themselves to death. And to point to hypocrites is also a non-starter—it has no bearing on whether the moral standard itself is sound or not.

We need to have a national conversation about this issue. If our collective moral house is in trouble, and the public also believes it is not a good thing that religion is losing influence, then ways to enhance religious beliefs and practices must be found. The alternative is more radical autonomy, the very condition that is driving our moral crisis.