

Religion Is Losing Its Clout

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The Pew Research Center's latest survey on religion discloses that 72 percent of Americans think religion is losing influence. This is not a welcome development: A majority of Americans see this as a negative outcome; only the unaffiliated are happy with this result. While the study does not explicitly say why this is happening, the data offer much ground for discussion.

One of the reasons why religion is losing its influence is the extent to which people of faith feel uncomfortable with their status. For example, 34 percent of evangelical Christians, including 42 percent of evangelical Protestants, and one in five Catholics (18 percent), say "it has become more difficult to be a member of their religious group in recent years."

Now compare this finding to those who have no religious affiliation: only 8 percent say "it has become harder to be a person with no religion in the U.S. in recent years, while 31 percent say it has become easier."

This may be the study's most salient finding, though it is not being reported this way. It must be asked: When in American history have people of faith found it more difficult to be a member of their religion than their faithless counterparts? Has it not always been the other way around, a tribute to the dominance of our Judeo-Christian ethos? The survey does not follow up on this issue, but in fairness to the researchers, they cannot be faulted; they cover a wide range of subjects. Still, it is worth exploring.

We know from several studies, dating back to the 1980s, that our elites, particularly in education, the media, the publishing industry, the entertainment sector, and the arts,

are overwhelmingly secularists. This matters because they are the ones who disseminate ideas – it is they who shape public opinion. One would be clueless not to conclude that elites have had much to do with creating the conditions that make people of faith uncomfortable with their public presence. Concurrent with this condition is the obverse: A more receptive milieu has been crafted for agnostics and atheists.

A culture that is not religion-friendly induces reticence on the part of the faithful, and this is precisely the kind of environment that causes religion to lose its influence. To be exact, many believers feel intimidated from expressing their views in public: Whether in the workplace or at a community forum, God-talk is considered the new taboo.

Americans sense something is wrong, which is why there has been a marked increase in the percentage who believe that churches and other houses of worship should express themselves on political and social issues; the figure jumped by 6 points since 2010 to 49 percent (statistically that is quite a leap in a short period of time). Moreover, six in 10 say members of Congress should have strong religious beliefs. Consistent with other data, the Republican Party is seen as much more religion-friendly than the Democratic Party. Significantly, only 30 percent of the public report that the Obama administration is friendly toward religion.

When religion loses its clout, everyone loses. That is the inescapable conclusion of social science research over many years. As such, we need to find ways to make our society more religion-friendly, not less. The problem is that those who are in a position to do so, namely the elites, are one of the main reasons we have this condition in the first place.

It is up to the clergy, and lay activists in religious circles, to embolden the faithful. Pope Francis spoke for many, of all religions, when he implored us to exercise a more robust public expression of our faith.

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