

Religion's fall in U.S. will affect everything

As society moves away from faith, loneliness and lack of community grow

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A just-published survey of the decline of religion in America should set off alarm bells in our heads. The growth of secularism is one more cause for anxiety about the future of our republic.

The study by the prestigious American Enterprise Institute — “Generation Z and the future of faith in America” (released on March 24) — shows a steady erosion of religious affiliation and the corresponding rise of atheism and agnosticism. Generation Z (born 1997 to 2012) is the least religious in our history, with 34% reporting that they aren’t affiliated with a church, synagogue or another religious body.

That’s nine points higher than for Generation X and five points higher than millennials. Alexis de Tocqueville, that astute observer of early 19th-century America, said he found the genius of our young republic in the moral voice of its churches. Today, that voice is increasingly silenced.

Not only is religious affiliation declining, but atheism and agnosticism are growing — 18% for Gen Z, the highest in our history, compared to 4% for the Silent Generation, which apparently did not find Nietzsche in the foxholes.

Many who profess belief don’t walk the walk. But nonbelief does not inspire great acts of charity, building hospitals or endowing educational institutions. Harvard may be militantly anti-religion today, but it started as a seminary to train Puritan clergy.

The AEI report observes that of those who left the religion of their childhood (an increasing share of the unaffiliated), most can’t point to a single incident that caused them to lose faith.

Still, it’s hard not to see a connection between the growth of secularism and a culture dedicated to debunking traditional religion. In a 2021 Gallup survey, only 37% said they had a great deal (or quite a lot) of confidence in organized religion. That’s a dramatic fall from 2001, when 60% said they had a lot of confidence in religious institutions.

Such trends do not happen in a vacuum. Undoubtedly, clerical sexual abuse had an impact, but minimal compared to the culture’s relentless attacks on religion and people of faith.

Where are our era’s great religious movies, like “The Song of Bernadette” and “The Ten Commandments”?

Unless it’s the religion of the left (renewable energy cultism, God-made-me-transgendered and perpetual penance for the sin of being born white and male), Hollywood portrays the religious as superstitious bumpkins or hate-filled fanatics.

Just one small example of the steady stream of mockery is the 2009 film “The Invention of Lying.” Set in a world where everyone always tells the truth, the hero discovers that he has the ability to make people believe things that aren’t true.

To comfort his dying mother, he tells her about a wonderful place where people go after death courtesy of the

Man in the Sky. When the word gets out, he becomes the world’s first prophet, who’s soon writing commandments on the back of take-out pizza boxes. This is the reality of religion, the movie says, stuff made up to make people feel better about their miserable lives.

Disbelief is taught in our schools, from elementary to university. You can’t say “God” in the public schools, but you can discuss the Darwinian theory of evolution and talk about the way religion has led to brutality and slaughter over millennia of recorded history.

It also led to the preservation of knowledge during the Dark Ages and everyday acts of kindness today.

Why does decline of belief matter?

As our society moves away from faith, there is a pervasive sense of loneliness and lack of community.

Isolation grows. We become solitary individuals caught up in social media and a metaverse where human connection is increasingly tenuous.

We don’t marry or have children. Government assumes the role of God. Instead of faith in the hereafter, we look to the omnipotent state to solve all of our problems, between elections.

The more religious you are, the more likely to vote Republican. Since you have a father in heaven, you don’t need one in Washington. According to Pew Research, in 2020, 59% of those who attend religious services monthly or more often voted for former President Donald Trump.

The diminishment of faith impacts on everything. As one of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s characters says in “The Brothers Karamazov,” “Without God, all things are permitted” — everything from failure to form families to soaring street crime, to ethnic cleansing.

Civilizations have always been based on a coherent belief system. The loss of faith could be a death sentence for ours in the West. What took millennia to achieve could be lost overnight.

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Don Feder is a former Boston Herald writer and syndicated columnist.