

## Introduction

Religious organizations in the United States played a key role in changing the Trump administration's policy concerning the separation of U.S. citizen children from their undocumented parents, as part of the administration's attempt to cope with the undocumented migrant situation in the country (Martin 2018). However, the lobbying success of these religious groups has rekindled, once again, the question of the role and position of religion in the American social and political square (Martin 2018).

## The Most Christian Nation in the World?

The United States is home to the largest Christian population in the world (173 million), although not with the highest rate of Christians per capita in the world (only 71%) (Cooperman 2015: 7). 1.9% of the American population declare themselves to be Jewish, 0.9% Muslim, 0.7% Buddhist, 0.7% Hindu, and 0.3% as belonging to another world religion. 4% declare themselves Agnostic and 3.1% Atheist. Nonetheless, 22% of Americans declare themselves as Unaffiliated (the so-called religious "Nones") (Cooperman 2015:21).

While the most devout Christians (who declare they pray more frequently, and religion is an important part of their daily lives) are found in Latin America and the Sub-Saharan region of Africa, the United States takes first place (68%) among the most devout nations in the Global North (Welsh 2018). "Sunday Stalwarts" characterize 93% of Christians in the U.S., that is, "they actively practice their faith and are very active in their congregations." Whereas 88% consider themselves "God-and-Country Believers", that is, "although they are less active in their churches, they hold many traditional religious beliefs and tend to the right on social and political issues." 69% may be categorized as "Diversely Devout," that is, "they are not only demographically diverse but also hold many different kinds of beliefs together with more established beliefs" (e.g., reincarnation, New Age philosophies, etc.). (Pew Research 2018). The United States is still mostly a Protestant country (39.7%), with 25% declaring themselves Evangelical Protestant and 14.7% Mainline Protestant. Yet, the largest Christian Church in America is the Roman Catholic Church, with 20.8% of the total U.S. population (Cooperman 2015:21).

## Christianity in U.S. Society and Politics

Protestants have historically tended to argue against the Catholic—or Thomistic—view, that the virtuous political life is simply a manifestation of inner virtue (Goyette 2013). They have advocated the opinion that virtue and power should be dealt with separately (Kainz 1993). The American project, mostly based on this Protestant ethos, prefers to support a minimalist vision of the State that would be strong enough, nonetheless, to protect minority groups from being persecuted, while confining faith to the internal forum. This is basically enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (Hancock 1988). Thus, Evangelical Christianity in the U.S. has traditionally adopted "an essentially depoliticized vision of itself, taking its role to be about local

# Religion as a Social Phenomenon in the USA Today

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charity, 'a personal relationship with Jesus' or 'the salvation of souls'" (Kimbriel 2017).

But, beginning in the 1970s with the rise of the Christian right which seeks "to apply their understanding of the teachings of Christianity to politics and to public policy by proclaiming the value of those teachings or by seeking to use those teachings to influence law and public policy," the pendulum swung towards a political Evangelical Christianity (Andersen 2005: 469). Nevertheless, since 2015 American Evangelicals have veered, once again, towards making a distinction between what is needed in the public forum and the ideals that should be upheld in private. This has allowed them to support political candidates that were less than virtuous in the private sphere but who would advance their understanding of the teachings of Christianity in the public sphere (Kimbriel 2017).

In the 2018 midterm elections, 56% of Protestants voted for the Republican Party versus 42% who voted Democrat. 50% of Catholics voted for the Democratic Party while 49% voted Republican (Podrebarac and Smith 2018). The political platform of the Republican Party generally supports an economic and socially conservative ideology that seeks to uphold traditional values whereas the Democratic Party tends to support a modern liberalism that advocates social and economic equality, along with the Welfare State (Sullivan 2009: 291).

Evangelical Protestants have been more consistently Republican in their voting patterns: 54% Republican and 44% Democrat in 2006; 59% Republican and 38% Democrat in 2010; 61% Republican and 27% Democrat in 2014. Catholics, on the other hand, have been more divided: 55% Democrat and 44% Republican in 2006; 44% Democrat and 54% Republican in 2010; and 45% Democrat and 54% Republican in 2014. Only Jews and Nones have been more consistent in voting for the Democratic Party—Jewish: 87% Democrat and 12% Republican in 2006 and 66% Democrat and 33% Republican in 2014. Nones: 74% Democrat and 22% Republican in 2006, 68% Democrat and 30% Republican in 2010, and 69% Democrat and 29% Republican in 2014 (Podrebarac and Smith 2018).

## Religious Makeup of the U.S. Government

Both Congress (88%) and the House of Representatives (91.3%) are dominated by Christians. Moreover, while 22% of Americans declare themselves Unaffiliated, only Democratic House Representative Kyrsten Sinema from Arizona declares herself a None (Oppenheimer 2012). Sinema just won in the mid-term elections in Arizona, where the Senate seat was vacated by Republican Jeff Flake "to become the first woman to win a U.S. Senate seat in the state" (Riccardi 2018).

The religious makeup of the current 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (January 3, 2017 – January 3, 2019) is, in the Senate, 58% Protestant, 24% Catholic, 8% Jewish, 6% Mormon, and 1% Buddhist. The House of Representatives is 55% Protestant, 33.1% Catholic, 5.1% Jewish, 1.6% Mormon, 1.6% Not religious/do not practice

religion, 0.7% Hindu, 0.5% Muslim, 0.5% Buddhist, 0.2% Unitarian, and 0.2% Unaffiliated or None (Sandstrom 2017).

For most of U.S. history, the United States Supreme Court was dominated by Protestant Christians. But today, the religious affiliation of each of the justices sitting as of October 2018 is predominantly Catholic and Jewish: Chief Justice John Roberts, and Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Sonia Sotomayor, and the newest appointment, Brett Kavanaugh, are Roman Catholic. Justice Neil Gorsuch is Episcopalian but was raised Roman Catholic. Justices Elena Kagan, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Stephen Breyer are Jewish (Shimron 2018).

President Donald Trump has described himself as Presbyterian, while his wife Melania has stated she is a Catholic, making her the second Catholic First Lady of the United States since Jacqueline Kennedy (Pulliam 2017). Despite their religious affiliations, they were married at Bethesda-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church. Their son Barron Trump now attends St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Potomac, Maryland (Pulliam 2017).

## The Rise of the Nones in the American Landscape

The number of Americans who identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated or Nones continues to rise rapidly. 1/5 of Americans and 1/3 of U.S. adults consider themselves Nones, the highest percentages in the religious history of the United States (Cooperman 2015: 21).

However, 68% of the 46 million unaffiliated Americans say they believe in God, 37% identify as "spiritual" although not "religious", and 21% say they pray every day. Moreover, most believe that religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor. Yet, 88% state that they are not looking for a religion that would be right for them. 70% of Nones feel that religious institutions are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules (67%), and too involved in politics (67%). 28% believe that it is a good thing that religion is increasingly losing its influence in American life (Funk and Smith 2012: 23).

63% of Nones are registered as Democrats versus 26% who lean towards the Republican Party. 38% consider themselves moderate or liberal when it comes to social and political views with only 20% considering themselves conservative (Funk and Smith 2012: 25). 72% hold that abortion should be legal in most cases, 73% favor same-sex marriage, and 50% prefer, interesting enough, a smaller government with fewer services versus 42% who prefer a bigger government with more services (Funk and Smith 2012: 26).

## Will Christianity Continue to Hold a Place of Prominence in America?

Projected religious changes in the global population from 2010 to 2050 predict that Muslims will increase from 1.6 billion (32.2%) to 2.76 billion (29.7%) and the Unaffiliated will only slightly increase from 1.13 billion to 1.23 billion, though percentage-wise, they will decrease from 16.4% to 13.2% of the global population. Nonetheless, the religious composition of the United States is predicted to go from 78.3% to 66.4% Christian, the Unaffiliated from 16.4% to 25.6%, and the Muslim population from 0.9% to 2.1% (Hackett, et al. 2015: 6). The Unaffiliated will grow the most (+6.7) while Muslims will increase by 0.5%, surpassing the Jewish faith as the second-largest religious

group in America (Hackett, et al. 2015: 6, Lipka 2015).

One of the main reasons for the decline of Christians and the growth of the Nones is so-called "generational replacement": The Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) "display much lower levels of religious affiliation, including less connection with Christian churches, than older generations" (Cooperman 2015: 11). The current American social and cultural context tends to cause "religious faith to atrophy among [believing] communities of all creeds, races, and national origin" (Davis 2018).

According to Psychology Professor Steven Reiss, "religion rises and falls in popularity depending on how well it satisfies our needs versus the secular alternatives" (Reiss 2016). Psychologists W. Keith Campbell and Jean Twenge cite a rise in narcissism and self-centeredness among the Millennial generations that might explain the four major shifts detected by Professor Reiss as possibly behind the decline in religious affiliation in the United States among Millennials (Campbell and Twenge 2013):

Organized religion versus spirituality, American Millennials prefer to search for a mystical, personal God that meets their individual needs. They feel that organized religion only gets in the way of true religious experience (Reiss 2016). 58.8 million American Nones believe in God, pray at least occasionally, and think of themselves as spiritual people although religiously unaffiliated (Cooperman 2015: 10).

Tribalism versus humanitarianism, American Millennials live in a globally interconnected world. As they experience the similarities of people everywhere, they tend to think of believers as alike, regardless of religious affiliation. Although this may drive their interest in interfaith activities, it lessens their need for loyalty to the moral code and religion of their ancestors ("tribalism") (Reiss 2016).

Traditional versus non-traditional families, Fewer than half of American Millennials live in "traditional" families, that is, "in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage" (Livingston 2014). Traditionally, organized religions have depended primarily on the family to rear religious children and recruit new church members. Moreover, organized religion may hold beliefs that are less relevant to children growing up in non-traditional families versus traditional ones (e.g., biblical views on divorce may not address the needs of children of divorced parents).

Trust versus loss of confidence in institutions, Trust in American institutions, outside of the military and small business, is below historical trends (Jones 2015). Confidence in religious institutions is at an all-time low, especially due to sexual and financial scandals in Church organizations (Saad 2015). Interestingly enough, despite major sexual abuse scandals, confidence in the Catholic Church has stabilized at improved levels (51%) (Saad 2015). This is mostly due to confidence in Pope Francis' leadership regarding these issues, although, after recent revelations of sex abuse scandals and coverup, particularly regarding ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, U.S. Catholics give Francis low marks (62% fair/poor versus 31% excellent/good) (Lipka and Masci 2018).

If these general social and political trends persist, the rising numbers of Nones will have a greater say in the shaping of a more secularized American experience and a further low-profile or private role for religion in U.S. society and politics. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean it will be so. Religions have a great capacity to change and adapt, as they have done in the past, trying to better meet basic human needs. Furthermore, a

2017 U.S. Department of Labor Study discovered that the post-Millennial generation, the so-called “Generation Z”, that is, individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, have a rate of church attendance during young adulthood (41%) that is higher than that among Millennials (18%), Generation X (21%), or Baby Boomers (26%) (2017:11) at the same ages. Thus, religion may still play and hold a prominent position as a social and political fact in the U.S.A. of the future.

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