

Religious persistence and secularization essay examples

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Politics in the United States are often split into two camps. There are Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, pro-choice activists and pro-life activists, and so on and so forth; one of the ways America is split politically is on the issue of secularization in society. It is difficult for people to agree on how much (if any) impact religion should have on the government of the United States; whenever the issue comes up, much discussion abounds. The fact remains, however, that while the importance of religion in other modernized nations is decreasing, the amount of weight that Americans give to religion has held steady for many years. The question of why religion has persisted in the United States is an interesting one, and one that Wald claims has a few different causes.

There has been much discussion in recent years regarding religion in America, with some claiming (or lamenting) that the strength of religion is waning, and others claiming that it is as strong as ever, or perhaps even stronger (Wald 8). The research that Wald gathered demonstrates that the power of religion in the average American's personal life has remained the same for some time; however, this research does not comment on the quality of religion in that American's life, so to speak. While religion may still be important to Americans, those who claim the power of religion is waning may claim that the changing face of religion is indicative of its loss of power (Wald 9).

Faith in America, Wald explains, have become differentiated, privatized, and secularized. Differentiated religion, or religion that controls its own sphere of experience, are designed to appeal to the individual; similarly, privatized religion is religion that exists and is subject to personal judgement and

morality (Wald 4). It is easy to see why a religious organization that is differentiated and privatized would appeal to an American; the American psyche values independence and personal choice, but not at the expense of community or morality.

In the chapter "A Secular Society?" Wald writes that the persistence of religion in American culture may have a few different causes. The first is cultural compatibility. American culture, Wald's research shows, may be particularly susceptible to religion because of the extreme emphasis the American political climate puts on individualism and relativism (Wald 19). Psychologically, people are pack animals, and need a community to truly thrive; religion may offer Americans this sense of community that their political ideals and thought does not offer them.

This idea of community is directly linked to another aspect of religious life that Wald postulates is contributing to the continuation of religion. The idea of belonging to a social community and having a social identity is important to people, and when an individual is part of a religion, he or she is automatically involved in a community of like-minded or similarly-minded individuals (Wald 19). People need a social identity, Wald says, and religion is a ready-made social identity for people to adopt.

One of the most convincing arguments regarding the persistence of religion in American society, however, is the argument that secularization in politics actually contributed to the increase in religion in people's personal lives. When individuals are free to choose their own beliefs, rather than those forced on them by a government, church, or other authority figure, they are more likely to be beliefs that are meaningful and important to the individual

(Wald 21). For instance, as the Church of England lost political power and secularization grew in England, religion became less and less important to the British. However, the governmental mandate in England still maintains that the Church of England is the official religious entity of the country-- unlike America, where no religious entity is explicitly sanctioned by the government.

It is, perhaps, this individual choice that allows religion to continue to persist in American culture. Without individual choice, the individualism that Americans are known for would perhaps kick in, and they would resent being told what and how to worship; but as it is now, they are allowed to choose, and do so for the reasons previously discussed.

Most other modernized societies have been experiencing a decrease in the importance of religion as time goes on, but the importance of religion in American life seems to be remaining constant or nearly constant. There are a variety of different reasons for this consistency, but one of the more worrying effects of religiosity is when religious individuals seek to undo secularization on a political level.

Integrating religion into the political sphere would undermine the values that the American government was built upon, but that is not the topic for discussion here. Wald's research suggests that it is the secular nature of the American government that allows religion to flourish in American society; if secularization of the political sphere were to be undone, some of the strength of religion in America could potentially fade.

Even though America is a secular society in the political sense, it is important to understand religion as it affects the American individual, Wald writes. It is

impossible to claim to understand the interactions between people and the government without looking through a religious lens; understanding religion is fundamental to understanding American politics.

References

Wald, Kenneth D, and Allison Calhoun-Brown. Religion and Politics in the United States. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011. Print.