

Ethics and Religion

An Email Discussion between Scott and a Friend (October 2012)

[On October 10, 2012 I mailed out the first item below, about a study which shows that religion is declining in America, to a bunch of friends. One of them, John, replied and raised the topic of whether religion is necessary or important in raising people to be moral—as is often claimed. This is the discussion that ensued. —S.H.]

On 10/10/2012 Scott wrote:
Hi Kirby (and all),

You've probably heard about the new study by the Pew Research Center which shows the increasing number of Americans, who when asked about their religion, say "none". The decline is especially sharp among young white Protestants. And even many evangelicals are abandoning their religion. It's all quite encouraging!

The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.

In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%).

Of course the percentage of outright atheists is still pretty small, and even many of them still have remnants of religion in their thinking (in an abstract form--philosophical idealism). But the general trend away from religion in this country is still unmistakable, especially among the youth. Maybe there is hope for more scientific thinking and rationality yet!

And this is also further evidence that the fears of some (such as the RCP) about imminent Christian fascism in this country have been quite overblown.

Full report at:
<http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

Scott

From: John
To: Scott
Sent: Wednesday, October 10, 2012 12:04:40 PM
Subject: Re: The decline of religion in the U.S.

Scott,

One issue with this, which I've discussed with a neighbor of mine from time to time, is the role religion plays in setting our 'moral compass'. Simplistically speaking, if we don't have religion around how do we learn to 'be good' and participate in a normal way in society? Is it just family or are there other social institutions that help us along here?

As Forest [another friend] indicates in his response to you, many people who drop out of religion just sort of float around with no clear direction.

Even though my neighbor says he's religious and believes in that stuff, I don't think he is really particularly devout. He just says that stuff because he's a Republican and self described conservative and that's his party line.

When I examine myself I would say that, because I was brought up Catholic, my values are a combination of whatever values my family brought to the table plus whatever my (minimal) religious training brought in.

I think this is an interesting basic side question to this discussion, because I can never give my neighbor an answer I think is good!

John

On 10/10/2012 8:41 PM, Scott wrote:
Hi John,

Religious people sometimes have really strange ideas about how religion supposedly promotes morality. One Catholic guy I once talked to about this asked me "Why would anybody be moral if they were not afraid of eternal damnation and hell fire?" I then asked him, "If you knew there was no such thing as a hell would you then go around robbing and murdering people, raping women, etc.?" He didn't reply. But I doubt that he was the sort of person who might have done such things even if he abandoned religion!

My view is that if people refrain from robbery, murder, rape, etc., *only because they fear the consequences* (whether that be the police & prison or eternity in hell), then they are obviously *NOT* moral at all! To be moral is to do what is actually right, because that is what you believe is right. And, obviously, you can come to believe some things are right and some other things are wrong even if you don't believe in God.

The argument should actually be made that religion tends to go against morality in very serious

ways. Religions have traditionally believed that it was right to murder people if they don't agree with you about religious dogma, for example, and many religious people in the world still believe this. Major religions have nearly always supported wars against other nations. (Armies have Chaplains.) Religion is more a support for war than an opposition to it. In the U.S., for example, those most in favor of imperialist wars against the rest of the world are the religious Right. Etc.

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What is morality all about anyway? It is actually very simple (though you would never know this from Sunday School!) Morality is primarily a matter of what is in the common, collective interests of the people. (It is true that in class society this has to be modified in an important way because different social classes have very opposed collective interests. Slave masters and slaves can never fully agree about what is right and wrong, for example. For more on this see the part of my essay on ethics which is posted online at: <http://www.massline.org/Philosophy/ScottH/MLM-Ethics-Ch1-2.pdf>)

It is in the common, collective interests of the people not to allow robbery, murder, rape, and so forth. And that is *why* those things are morally wrong. Not really all that mysterious, is it?!

People are social animals, and we have always lived in social groups, going back even to our pre-human evolutionary ancestors. But there have also always been individual interests which sometimes go against this in some cases. This has required us to develop various means to strongly promote cooperative behavior which benefits the whole group. Evolution has even changed our brains to promote this, by developing programmable consciences. What we believe is right and wrong is originally, at least, what we were programmed to believe as small children. Those moral ideas were internalized so that even if it is in our individual interests to go against collective interests, we find it emotionally difficult to do so. (I.e., consciences especially help us in moments of selfish temptation.)

In addition, people developed powerful social ideologies to promote cooperative behavior in the interests of the whole group. This is where the ideology of morality comes in, and why it came to exist. It is why it still exists, even in dog-eat-dog, "look out for number one" capitalist society.

It is true that with the rise of religious ideologies there was often a tendency to merge religion with morality, or to use religious dogma to support the morality. Thus, the *Bible* includes the Ten Commandments (actually two slightly different versions of them!), some of which are religious ("Have no other Gods before me...") and some of which are moral maxims ("Thou shalt not kill"). Of course, this was frequently hypocritical, and religions have often urged their followers to kill despite "commandments" like this.

So this is *how* religion came to be associated with morality; it was one aspect of the ideology that was used historically to reinforce cooperative behavior in the interests of the whole group. But religion was never the source of morality. That was always the common, collective interests of the people. And there have always been non-religious ideologies (such as philosophical, political, etc.) which also reinforce moral behavior.

Not only can these ideologies of cooperation, sharing, and supporting the collective interests of the people take the entire place of religious-based moral commands, they can do a much better job of it--and be far less prone to co-optation by any exploitative ruling class.

While many religious people are very moral on many topics, few of them are opposed to

capitalism, patriotism, imperialist wars, and so forth. The morality of religious people is almost always blind to some of the worst evils in the world today. Established religions make their peace with the needs and requirements of the ruling class. ("Render unto Caesar..."). This is why, with relatively few exceptions, the most moral people in the world are not religious at all.

And the existence of tens of millions of atheists around the world, who are at least as moral as the average religious person, proves that religion is no longer needed even as an external support for morality.

Scott

On 10/10/12 John replied:

Scott,

In reading your response, I think that the idea of moral behavior being enforced by the common interests of the people, with no need for religion, is the way I felt it should be/is, but I guess I never could articulate it properly. Also in a lot of articles I've read, and in discussions on the topic, a lot of the 'common wisdom' was that religion was a primary driver that developed to enforce moral values and keep societies more cohesive than they would otherwise be. I guess this is partially true, but as you indicate, we don't have to consider it to be a main driver.

It is funny though when I think about the attitudes my neighbor has. He is an accomplished individual and very smart. But the oxymoronish part of his outlook is that while he believes he is religious and moral, he has no problem with the U.S. going to war for reasons I don't think are very good and he is a proud gun owner ready to use them at a moment's notice. This indicates to me that religion does introduce more problems than it solves. By the way, I don't think you and him would get along very well!

I guess we have a ways to go from a social perspective.

John

[End]