12.6: Trends in Religious Belief and Activity

Learning Objectives

- Summarize the evidence on the nature and extent of secularization.
- Discuss trends in regard to religious conservatism in the United States.
- Describe the relationship between religiosity and deviant behavior.

Because religion is such an important part of our society, sociologists and other observers have examined how religious thought and practice have changed in the last few decades. We discuss two of the most important trends here.

Secularization

Secularization refers to the weakening importance of religion in a society. It plays less of a role in people’s lives, as they are less guided in their daily behavior by religious beliefs. The influence of religious organizations in society also declines, and some individual houses of worship give more emphasis to worldly concerns such as soup kitchens than to spiritual issues. There is no doubt that religion is less important in modern society than it was before the rise of science in the 17th and 18th centuries. Scholars of religion have tried to determine the degree to which the United States has become more secularized during the last few decades (Finke & Stark, 2005; Fenn, 2001). Finke, R., & Stark, R. (2005). The churching of America: Winners and losers in our religious economy (2nd ed.). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Fenn, R. K. (2001). Beyond idols: The shape of a secular society. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

The best evidence shows that religion has declined in importance since the 1960s but still remains a potent force in American society as a whole and for the individual lives of Americans (Finke & Scheitle, 2005). Finke, R., & Scheitle, C. (2005). Accounting for the uncounted: Computing correctives for the 2000 RCMS data. Review of Religious Research,
Although membership in mainstream Protestant denominations has declined since the 1960s, membership in conservative denominations has risen. Most people (92% in the Pew survey) still believe in God, and, as already noted, more than half of all Americans pray daily.

Scholars also point to the continuing importance of civil religion, or the devotion of a nation’s citizens to their society and government (Santiago, 2009). Santiago, J. (2009). From “civil religion” to nationalism as the religion of modern times: Rethinking a complex relationship. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 48*(2), 394–401. In the United States, love of country—patriotism—and admiration for many of its ideals are widespread. Citizens routinely engage in rituals, such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or singing the National Anthem, that express their love of the United States. These beliefs and practices are the secular equivalent of traditional religious beliefs and practices and thus a functional equivalent of religion.

**The Rise of Religious Conservatism**

The rise of religious conservatism also challenges the notion that secularization is displacing religion in American life. Religious conservatism in the U.S. context is the belief that the Bible is the actual word of God. As noted earlier, religious conservatism includes the various Baptist denominations and any number of evangelical organizations, and its rapid rise was partly the result of fears that the United States was becoming too secularized. Many religious conservatives believe that a return to the teachings of the Bible and religious spirituality is necessary to combat the corrupting influences of modern life (Almond, Appleby, & Sivan, 2003). Almond, G. A., Appleby, R. S., & Sivan, E. (2003). *Strong religion: The rise of fundamentalisms around the world*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

*Figure 12.19*

The rise of religious conservatism in the United States was partly the result of fears that the nation was becoming too secularized.

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Today about one-third of Americans state a religious preference for a conservative denomination (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). Because of their growing numbers, religious conservatives have been the subject of increasing research. They tend to hold politically conservative views on many issues, including abortion and the punishment of criminals, and are more likely than people with other religious beliefs to believe in such things as the corporal punishment of children (Burdette, Ellison, & Hill, 2005). They are also more likely to believe in traditional roles for women.

Closely related to the rise of religious conservatism has been the increasing influence of what has been termed the “new religious right” in American politics (Martin, 2005; Capps, 1990; Moen, 1992). Since the 1980s, the religious right has been a potent force in the political scene at both the national and local levels, with groups like the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition effective in raising money, using the media, and lobbying elected officials. As its name implies, the religious right tries to advance a conservative political agenda consistent with conservative religious concerns. Among other issues, it opposes legal abortion, gay rights, and violence and sex in the media, and it also advocates an increased religious presence in public schools. Although the influence of the religious right has waned since the 1990s, its influence on American politics is bound to be controversial for many years to come.

Religiosity and Deviant Behavior

As discussed earlier, Durkheim considered religion a moral force for socialization and social bonding. Building on this insight, sociologists and other scholars have thought that religiosity might reduce participation in “deviant” behaviors such as drinking, illegal drug use, delinquency, and certain forms of sexual behavior. A growing body of research, almost all of it on adolescents, finds that this is indeed the case. Holding other factors constant, more religious adolescents are less likely than other adolescents to drink and take drugs, to commit various kinds of delinquency, to have sex during early adolescence or at all, and to have sex frequently if they do start having sex (Regenerus, 2007). There is much less research on whether this relationship continues to hold true during adulthood. If religion might have more of an impact during adolescence, an impressionable period of one’s life, then the relationship found during adolescence may not persist into adulthood. However, two recent studies did find that more religious, unmarried adults were less likely than other unmarried adults to have premarital sex partners (Barkan, 2006; Uecker, 2008). These results suggest that religiosity may indeed continue to affect sexual behavior and perhaps other behaviors during adulthood.
Religiosity, Physical Health, and Psychological Well-Being

Sociologists and other scholars have also built on Durkheim’s insights to assess whether religious involvement promotes better physical health and psychological well-being. As noted earlier, a growing body of research finds that various measures of religious involvement, but perhaps especially attendance at religious services, are positively associated with better physical and mental health. Religious involvement is linked in many studies to lower rates of cardiovascular disease, hypertension (high blood pressure), and mortality (Ellison & Hummer, 2010; Green & Elliott, 2010). Ellison, C. G., & Hummer, R. A. (Eds.). (2010). Religion, families, and health: Population-based research in the United States. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Green, M., & Elliott, M. (2010). Religion, health, and psychological well-being. Journal of Religion & Health, 49(2), 149–163. doi:10.1007/s10943-009-9242-1 It is also linked to higher rates of happiness and lower rates of depression and anxiety.

These effects are thought to stem from several reasons. First, religious attendance increases social ties that provide emotional and practical support when someone has various problems and that also raise one’s self-esteem. Second, personal religious belief can provide spiritual comfort in times of trouble. Third, and as noted in the preceding section, religious involvement promotes healthy lifestyles for at least some people, including lower use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, as well as other risky behaviors such as gambling and unsafe sex. Lower participation in all of these activities helps in turn to increase one’s physical and mental health.

Conclusion

- Despite concerns among many observers that secularization has been occurring, religion remains important in many Americans’ lives and a potent force in American society.
- Membership in conservative denominations has increased in the United States in recent decades. Today about one-third of Americans state a religious preference for a conservative denomination.
- Higher levels of religiosity are associated with lower involvement in drinking, illegal drug use, sexual behavior, and some forms of delinquency.

For Your Review

1. What evidence that you have observed suggests to you that the United States has become a secular society? What evidence suggests to you that it remains a fairly religious society?
2. Why do you think religiosity is associated with lower levels of involvement in deviant behavior? What is it about religiosity that might reduce deviant behavior?

Addressing Educational and Religious Issues: What Sociology Suggests

Sociological theory and research have helped people to understand the reasons for various issues arising in education and religion. Accordingly, this final section discusses strategies suggested by this body of work for addressing a few of these issues.

Education
Two major issues are school inequality and school violence. The inequality that exists in American society finds its way into the schools, and inequality in the schools in turn contributes to inequality in the larger society. Although scholars continue to debate the relative importance of family backgrounds and school funding and other school factors for academic achievement, it is clear that schools with decaying buildings and uncommitted teachers cannot be expected to produce students with high or even adequate academic achievement. At a minimum, schools need to be smaller and better funded, teachers need to be held accountable for their students’ learning, and decaying buildings need to be repaired. On the national level, these steps will cost billions of dollars, but this expenditure promises to have a significant payoff (Smerdon & Borman, 2009). Smerdon, B. A., & Borman, K. M. (Eds.). (2009). Saving America’s high schools. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

School violence is another issue that needs to be addressed. The steps just outlined should reduce school violence, but other measures should also help. One example involves antibullying programs, which include regular parent meetings, strengthened playground supervision, and appropriate discipline when warranted. Research indicates that these programs reduce bullying by 20%–23% on the average (Farrington & Trofi, 2009). Farrington, D. P., & Trofi, M. M. (2009). School-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization. Campbell Systematic Reviews, 6, 1–148. doi:10.4073/csr.2009.6 Any reduction in bullying should in turn help reduce the likelihood of school massacres like Columbine, as many of the students committing these massacres were humiliated and bullied by other students (Adler & Springen, 1999). Adler, J., & Springen, K. (1999, May 3). How to fight back. Newsweek, p. 36–38.

Experts also think that reducing the size of schools and the size of classes will reduce school violence, as having smaller classes and schools should help create a less alienating atmosphere, allow for more personal attention, and make students’ attitudes toward their school more positive (Levin & Fox, 1999). Levin, J., & Fox, J. A. (1999, April 25). Schools learning a grim lesson (but will society flunk?). The Boston Globe, p. C1. More generally, because the roots of school violence are also similar to the roots of youth violence outside the schools, measures that reduce youth violence should also reduce school violence. As discussed in previous chapters, such measures include early childhood prevention programs for youths at risk for developmental and behavioral problems, and policies that provide income and jobs for families living in poverty (Welsh & Farrington, 2007). Welsh, B. C., & Farrington, D. P. (Eds.). (2007). Preventing crime: What works for children, offenders, victims and places. New York, NY: Springer.

Religion

One major religious issue today is religious intolerance. Émile Durkheim did not stress the hatred and conflict that religion has promoted over the centuries, but this aspect of conflict theory’s view of religion should not be forgotten. Certainly religious tolerance should be promoted among all peoples, and strategies for doing so include education efforts about the world’s religions and interfaith activities for youth and adults. The Center for Religious Tolerance (http://www.c-r-t.org/index.php), headquartered in Sarasota, Florida, is one of the many local and national organizations in the United States that strive to promote interfaith understanding. In view of the hostility toward Muslims that increased in the United States after 9/11, it is perhaps particularly important for education efforts and other activities to promote understanding of Islam.

Religion may also help address other social issues. In this regard, we noted earlier that religious belief and practice seem to promote physical health and psychological well-being. To the extent this is true, efforts that promote the practice of one’s faith may enhance their physical and mental health. In view of the health problems of older people and also their greater religiosity, some scholars urge that such efforts be especially undertaken for people in their older years.
Moberg, D. O. (2008). Spirituality and aging: Research and implications. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging, 20*, 95–134. We also noted that religiosity helps to reduce drinking, drug use, and sexual behavior among adolescents and perhaps among adults. This does not mean that religion should be forced on anyone against their will, but this body of research does suggest that efforts by houses of worship to promote religious activities among their adolescents and younger children may help prevent or otherwise minimize risky behaviors during this important period of the life course.