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Religion and Societal Function: Still Relevant Today

For years religion has been used as a means of controlling peoples' behavior, to create structure and constrain behaviors within a society. Some may argue that in these modern times religion is no longer necessary to guide moral compasses or to negotiate acceptable social conduct. There is, however, much evidence to the contrary. Religion is still a driving force in many aspects of peoples' lives and there are many different reasons for this. Being a part of a religion is much more than celebrating a supreme deity; religion gives people a sense of morality, a community of support, and a framework for how they should live their lives, and comfort in times of uncertainty. These reasons, among others, often drive people to make faith-based decisions as opposed to decisions based on secular logic.

Religion can be a very powerful mitigating factor when it comes to making important life decisions. For instance; those who are more religious are less likely to abuse substances like drugs or alcohol. They are also more likely to practice abstinence and live a life of sexual purity. Religious affiliation can also determine when people get married and even who they get married to. For example, a major decision such as marriage, which will permanently alter one's life and the lives on one's family, is often still overseen to one degree or another by a religious institution. The degree of influence over this major rite of passage by a religious entity can vary from simply the location of a ceremony to the selection of one's mate. Many argue that today organized religion is losing its influence and is no longer a primary cultural force, but that is not

necessarily true. Instead, religion has adapted the times. Even in this modern age of reason, around 95% of Americans reported that they believed in God or a higher power and 78% say religious beliefs play an important role in their lives, 75% state that religious beliefs influence their decision make, and a smaller, but still relevant portion, of Americans, about 40%, attend worship services regularly (Billieux, Sherman, & Latkin 37-38). Religion has, and always will, play a role in how many societies function, even in this most socially and culturally liberal, modern-day America.

Perhaps one of the most difficult behaviors to modify or control is addiction. Addiction to harmful substances such as alcohol, drugs, or tobacco plagues thousands upon thousands of Americans. Addictions like these can destroy individual lives, families, and communities both figuratively and literally. The road to recovery is often a very long and painful experience paved with uncertainty. The most effective addiction prevention is to simply not engage in harmful behavior in the first place; to avoid drugs and tobacco and to drink alcohol in moderation. Studies have found that those who attend congregational events on a regular basis are much less likely to fall victim to substance abuse. Simply put, religious involvement is directly correlated with good mental and physical health (Ellison, Barrett, & Moulton 660).

The question then becomes, how does the practice of religion mitigate behavior in such a way as to discourage substance abuse? Is it simply that those who participate are told to just say no and they listen? Or are there other factors at play that make religious practice an effective behavioral modifier? Many people feel a responsibility to be “good” and to fulfill their religious commitments and since most religions promote an ethos of “moderation in all things” including commonly abused substances. This sense of responsibility encourages an internal mode of behavioral control where the individual based on fear of social sanction or rejection by their

peers will modify their behavior accordingly (Ellison, Barret, & Moulton 661). For the most part, religion teaches those to avoid things that would affect their physical and mental health negatively: “thy body is thy temple”. In Christian scripture there are passages that directly address “drunkenness” as unacceptable (Garcia et al. 21).

There is compelling evidence that there are substantive advantages when dealing with addictive behaviors for those who attend worship service regularly (Ellison, Barret, & Moulton 662), but what about for those who don't? There is evidence for that as well. Positive effects have been noted even when a person who may never have previously participated in any religious institutions or behaviors joins a program such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Religious strategies have been adopted by programs like AA to assist individuals in overcoming substance abuse. Alcoholics Anonymous is a 12-step program designed for recovery alcoholics. Each of the 12 steps is based on Christian values and beliefs, and this program, and others like it, have proven successful even with people who have never considered themselves religious individuals. Faith is an incredible motivator in the face of addiction which is an incredibly difficult obstacle to overcome. Recovery often entails enduring painful and sometimes life threatening physiological challenges as well as severe mental and emotional hurdles. Programs like AA offer needed structure and support and while there are numerous articles that will argue that these faith-based programs are not more effective than medically monitored treatment programs, what they cannot argue against is that these programs are available to the masses regardless of an individual's economic and fiscal fitness, i.e., AA programs and the like are available to all that need them.

An interesting statistic is that more and more Americans are getting married at a younger age. This trend has been consistently seen throughout recent years and there has been

much speculation as to why (Uecker 392). Of note is an observation that those who are more religious get married earlier than those who are not (Ellison, Barrett, & Moulton 663). Religion may be responsible for this trend that's been seen over the last half of a century. Those who believe the bible is authoritative may marry earlier but even those who don't abide by the bible are marrying earlier because those around them are (Uecker 395). Those who get married to fit in with their peers are unknowingly conforming to religious influence. This is an example of religion being an unknown influential factor. For those who are religious, their family is held in the utmost regard. It comes before many other things in life, even education or financial stability (Uecker 396). With this in mind, marriage becomes a priority and thus marrying younger becomes a source of accomplishment; being married is seen as "the good life" and something to strive for (Uecker 397). For a man, or woman, without a family is nothing. There is evidence of both social and traditional motivation when discussing religion and its effects on behavior, marrying early is a perfect example of this. While religious doctrines that put marriage on a pedestal and prohibit premarital sex do contribute to the reasons why people get married, scripture is just one of them. Religion provides people with schemas and teaches them what is good, right, and true. Religious institutions provide guidelines to understanding one's life and the surrounding world. It breaks down like this: those who identify as religious value religious schemas, and then demonstrate those beliefs through their behavior. Someone who is religious and "pro-marriage" will be more likely to marry early because they believe that to be a desirable life outcome and find comfort in staying true to their beliefs and identity as a religious person (Uecker 398). Since the mid 1980's, there has been a growing body of empirical research to support religion's perseverance rather than decline (Siglow, Shain, & Bergery 305). Marriage is a perfect example of this.

While there may be many reasons for this interesting phenomenon, there is no debate that marriage has remained important to our society. The desire to get married has remained consistent despite increasing divorce rates; marriage is a ritual that is most often conducted within a religious context and it is one that has stayed extremely culturally relevant.

In today's society, same-faith (homogenous) marriages are often highly sought out; religious people are more than three times as likely to cite religious reasons for choosing partners (Sigalow, Shain, & Bergey 313). While some may get married for the financial benefits, many others seek to validate their unions in the eyes of God. However, this has also proved to be true for individuals who fought for same sex marriages. People were not only fighting to be recognized as married by the government but by the church as well. The passion spewed over from this debate, from both sides, is evidence of the retention of religious influence over modern day American culture. Marriage means "till death do us part", a huge commitment that people make in accordance with their religious beliefs. Religion not only effects if you will get married, but when you do so, and whom you might marry.

In addition to religion controlling people's decision-making behavior, it can also be used to control the most basic of human desires, sex. While sex is becoming less and less of a cultural taboo, religion is still a strong motivator for those who chose to stay abstinent. Most religions forbid premarital relations, including the many of denominations most Americans belong to. In the last century, mostly the latter years, there has been a noticeable change in attitudes towards sex. Sex has become more accepted than ever before. As a result, adolescents are having sex much earlier and rates of teen pregnancy have sky rocketed. It may seem as if our society has completely distanced itself from traditional religious beliefs about sex and abandoned the practice of abstinence completely. With modern media's obsession with idea that "sex sells"

and the alarming statistics pertaining to American youth, it is easy to see why most people believe that to be true. However; it is not the case for everyone. There is still a strong basis of adolescents and young people who believe in and practice abstinence. While they may not be the majority anymore their motivation as purely religious is still proof of religion continuing to control behavior. Religion has not become any less influential; America has simply become less religious. Those who prioritize their religion consistently showcase it through their actions. Religion can encourage young people to remain abstinent in order to preserve their sense of self and increase the likelihood of creating meaningful relationships in the future (Adamczyk and Felson 475). It has been scientifically proven that teens who participate in religion-supported extracurricular activities abstain from sex longer and have fewer sexual partners when compared to those who participate in other extracurricular activities, like sports or music (Adamczyk and Felson 474). This could be attributed to the fact that teens who joining religiously affiliated clubs are surrounded by others who hold them accountable to their values, values they share as well. For others they simply abstain from premarital sex because it is regarded as a sin. The bible can be a very powerful behavioral deterrent in this case. Religion instills intrinsic motivation in people, the most powerful kind of motivation (Woodroof 346). This kind of motivation is strong enough to deny the most instinctual and powerful of desires, an integral part of basic human nature; a strong demonstration of the power religion can have over human behavior. In this case, religion trumps instinctual behavior, truly remarkable.

It is undisputable that religion has influenced people's behavior for centuries; it's even debated that religion was created for that said purpose. Despite drastic changes in culture and society over time, religion still prevails and proves to still be a relevant driving force behind many human behaviors. Drug use, marriage, and sexual behavior are three major examples of

where religion consistently intervenes. Individual motivations are influenced by faith and the belief in something bigger and more powerful than human nature. These sorts of beliefs hold someone accountable for their actions and thus cause them to act accordingly. There is a very powerful social aspect to religion as well. Whether it is support from a religious community or pressure from surrounding peers, social motivation is a huge factor when examining religious motivation. It is not that religion has ceased to effect behavior; it may be that there are simply less avidly religious people, which is an issue in it of itself. The bottom line is that religion has not become any less influential to those who value its importance.

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