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22 April 2016

The Questionable Future of Christianity in the United States

In a nation where most Americans “identify themselves as Christians,” the religion of Christianity has long been a prominent and influential part of America (Orwin 27). The United States has become an extremely diversified nation, bringing in people of all races and religion. Yet, Christianity still remains the most dominant religion in America. Although Christianity is slowly conceding some of its influence to other religions as the nation becomes more religiously diversified, Christianity’s influence remains incomparable to that of any other religion present in the U.S. However, due to the increasing divide between Christianity and American citizens on the issue of same-sex marriage, as well as the decreased willingness of Christians to express and impose their beliefs, Christianity will begin to concede a larger portion of its influence within the U.S., and at a potentially faster, and more detrimental rate.

America’s rapidly shifting views on same-sex marriage pose a threat to the future of Christianity’s favorability and influence. Christianity has long denounced homosexuality, and the increasing acceptance of homosexuality among the American public could produce even more negative perceptions of Christian values. The consequences for Christianity as a result of their stance on same-sex marriage will become apparent in the coming decades. Even more problematic for the future of Christianity is the rate that the acceptance of homosexuality is increasing at within the age group of the U.S. with the longest life expectancy, the youth of America, as well as within the most Christian region in the U.S., the South.

According to Rod Dreher, the South is the only region in the U.S. “where fewer than 50 percent of all those polled endorse same-sex marriage” (45). However, that percent will increase significantly in the next few decades, as a “Gallup poll revealed that 80 percent of young Americans believe in same-sex marriage” (45). The shifting views on homosexuality in the South is evidenced by “one of the most socially conservative and religiously observant states,” Louisiana, where a “shrinking majority opposes gay marriage” (45).

Religious leaders realize the potentially severe backlash that Christianity could receive from young Americans as a result of the religion’s opposition to same-sex marriage. Some religious leaders are even being advised to avoid the topic completely when young Americans are present in order to mitigate any potential damage to Christianity. According to Dreher, in 2014, just before a clergyman gave a speech on religion at a private school in the socially conservative state of Louisiana, he was given a warning from a teacher: “Don’t talk about gay marriage” (45). Young Americans are not only becoming more accepting of homosexuality, but there is also an unparalleled “intensity of feeling on the subject [homosexuality] among the young” (45). The intensity of pro-gay marriage views among the youth could potentially expedite and multiply negative perceptions of the Christian brand in the near future. The Louisiana clergyman also provides an example of this intensity. After questioning the teachers’ initial warning, the clergyman was given an explanation: “If these kids find out that you are against gay marriage, they won’t listen to a thing you have to say about anything” (45).

The consequences that Christianity could experience due to their opposition to gay marriage can only be classified as speculation at this point. However, the statistics fueling speculation should give Christians reason to worry. Based off of the Gallup poll revealing that “80 percent of young Americans believe in same-sex marriage” (45), it appears to be more

probable than not that the overwhelming majority of the American public will hold views in support of same-sex marriage within several decades.

Despite the increasingly diverse demographics of the United States, Wesley A. Kort claims that diversity has had minimal impact on the influence of Christianity in the U.S. According to Kort, the United States' diversity has not "produced partitions, open discord, or religious suppression" and this is "one of the remarkable things about American culture" (467). Although America's history has been plagued by the hatred and discriminatory treatment of Native Americans and African Americans by the dominant white society, Kort claims that these hostile attitudes represent outliers of American attitudes as a whole. Instead, America has proven that it embraces diversity, and treats it "not primarily as a problem," but rather as an asset that facilitate the reduction of religious tensions in the U.S. (Kort 467).

In contrast to Kort's claims, other sources of research have found that diversity has, in fact, hurt Christianity's influence within the U.S., but not enough to create any significant concerns for the religion just yet. A Gallup poll in 2014 surveyed 200 "upper middle class and middle class" American citizens across the nation, and concluded that "Americans are a religious people" (Orwin 26). Regarding those polled who identified as Christian, Gallup concluded that "moderation and toleration are the bedrock principles of the American middle class" (26). Alan Wolfe, the author of *One Nation, After All*, a book that analyzed the results of this poll, reached additional conclusions about the data. Wolfe's findings point to no noticeable decrease in religious affiliation among Americans. However, Wolfe finds that Christians are less willing to impose or express their beliefs to non-Christians. Wolfe claims that "a large number of those to whom we spoke, fear that morality if understood as a set of moral injunctions, can lead to intolerance, an outcome unacceptable to a people as nonjudgmental as middle-class Americans"

(26). Wolfe further asserts that “Americans take their religion seriously,” but out of fear for appearing intolerant, they refuse to establish “rules about how other people should live” (26).

Even in a nation that is becoming increasingly more diversified and accepting of other religious beliefs, Orwin claims that “most Americans still identify themselves as Christians” (27). However, Orwin also alludes to a decrease in the religion’s influence, saying “their [Christians] Christianity lacks coattails” (27). To demonstrate his point, Orwin describes Christianity as being, in the past, “the one culture practiced by the one nation,” but goes on to say that Christianity “has now slipped into the status of a subculture” (28).

Tolerance, moderation, and acceptance of other cultures and religions are among the most important principles of the middle class, America’s largest social hierarchy. The population of the U.S. is continuing to increase, and with a larger population comes more races, more religions, and more diversity. Tolerance, moderation, and acceptance will become more of the normality as people interact and associate with the increasingly diversified population of the U.S. As these three principles become more prominent, Americans will be less willing to impose or express their religious beliefs, be it beliefs of Christianity, Judaism, or any other religion present in the U.S. The influence of all American religions will decrease as the displays of religious beliefs become suppressed, but this will not necessarily diminish the overall influence or status of any particular religion in proportion to another religion. It will however, magnify any further losses of influence or status incurred by religions in other ways, such as through a decrease in the number of followers of a religion, or through negative public perception of a religion’s teachings. As the most popular and influential religion in the U.S., Christianity has the most to lose, making it the most vulnerable religion in an increasingly diversified nation.

As the youth of today's America age and the elderly of today begin to die off, the percentage of American citizens with pro-gay marriage views will increase, as a much higher percentage of America's youth have favorable views of gay marriage in comparison to the views of older American citizens. Assuming that the "intensity of feeling on the subject [homosexuality] among the young" (Dreher 45) stays true, Christianity and its opposition to same-sex marriage will have to deal with an American public that overwhelmingly and intensely supports same-sex marriage, and extremely dislikes anyone who opposes same-sex marriage. This will put Christianity into a very tough and uncomfortable position. Christianity may be forced to either completely redefine their values and lose the trust, respect, and support of their followers, or risk severe backlash from the American public while losing a significant portion of their influence and status in America.

Christianity is currently the most popular and influential religion in the United States. Christianity may appear to be in a comfortable position right now, but that could change in several decades. Christianity faces a questionable future when considering the changing views of the American public and the continuous increase of diversity within the country. As a result of the increasing divide between Christianity and American citizens on the issue of same-sex marriage, as well as the decreased willingness of Christians to express and impose their beliefs, Christianity will concede a larger portion of its influence within the U.S. at a potentially faster, and more detrimental rate. The religion of Christianity will be forced to make some very difficult decisions in the near future. Those decisions will determine the future of the religion, for better or for worse.

Works Cited

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