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The Delay of Marriage and the Decline of Church Attendance

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W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia has written a must-read article in the “Houses of Worship” column of *The Wall Street Journal*. Wilcox, whose research and analysis is consistently top-notch and relevant, considers the impact of the expansion of the government sector in American society. As the “welfare state” expands, the church recedes as the source of needed charity and social services. Thus, as Wilcox notes, the expansion of the state is, in effect, a driving force behind the secularization of the society.

In “God Will Provide — Unless the Government Gets There First,” Wilcox offers reflections on the recent release of the American Religious Identification Survey [ARIS] which indicated that the number of secular Americans has increased from 2% in 1962 and 8% in 1990 to fully 15% in 2008.

His argument, put simply, is that the expansion of the government sector to offer cradle-to-grave social services contributes to the secularization of the society.

Then he offers this crucial insight:

The secular tide appears to be running strongest among young Americans. Religious attendance among those 21 to 45 years old is at its lowest level in decades, according to Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow. Only 25% of young adults now attend services regularly, compared with about one-third in the early 1970s.

The most powerful force driving religious participation down is the nation’s recent retreat from marriage, Mr. Wuthnow notes. Nothing brings women and especially men into the pews like marriage and parenthood, as they seek out the religious, moral and social support provided by a congregation upon starting a family of their own. But because growing numbers of young adults are now postponing or avoiding marriage and childbearing, they are also much less likely to end up in church on any given Sunday. Mr. Wuthnow estimates that America’s houses of worship would have about six million more regularly attending young adults if today’s young men and women started families at the rate they did three decades ago.

Citing the research of Robert Wuthnow, Wilcox argued that the delay of marriage is a primary driver of secularization. This goes hand in hand with the fact that the extension of adolescence comes with vast and often unnoticed effects. Adulthood is meant for adult responsibilities, and for the vast majority of young people that will mean marriage and parenthood. The extension of adolescence into the twenties (maybe now even the thirties) is highly correlated with the rise of secularism and with lower rates of church attendance.

This is not only an article that should be read, but an argument that must be heard.



