

4. Religion and Civil Society

RELIGIOUS freedom is widely regarded as the cornerstone of America's political and civil liberties. Religious institutions play a major role in cultivating the virtues that are essential for self-government and a healthy civil society. Yet that foundation has been eroded by court decisions, congressional actions, and a general climate of intimidation in the public square. The problem is especially acute in policy debates and public schools. Religion should not be barred from the public square, and religious organizations should not be barred from participating in government programs to provide social services. Religious practice is a vital private and public good, and public policy should recognize the important civic contribution of religious institutions and individual religious practice.

by *Joe Loconte*

Notes

Recommendations

1. Renew serious debate on the role of religion in American life and affirm the right of private associations and individuals to publicly uphold religious tenets. This should include further investigation by policymakers into the relationship between religious practice and the life of the nation, on the health of America's families and the content of its culture. Religious practice can and should be factored into the planning and debate on the nation's urgent social problems. Americans cannot build their future without drawing on the strengths that come to them from the practice of their religious beliefs.

2. Continue to appoint and confirm judges who understand the important contributions of religion to public life. The religion clauses of the First Amendment—"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"—are intended to safeguard religious liberty. The Constitution's prohibition against an establishment of religion does not imply that religion should be barred from political or civic life. The Founders, in their passionate love of freedom, promoted the freedom of all Americans to practice their religious beliefs (or not to practice any), but Congress and the courts have begun to crowd religion out of the public square. It is time to bring it back. Competent judges, appointed by the President and

confirmed by the Senate, will work to accommodate religious belief in the public square wherever possible so that it may at times be religious, not only agnostic.

3. Continue to level the playing field in federal social service programs by reviewing procedural issues that disadvantage faith-based organizations that wish to participate. Federal policy should seek, as President George W. Bush has said, to “mobilize the armies of compassion.” The reach of faith-based organizations often extends beyond that of government social service programs in changing lives. Government should continue to protect the religious liberty and integrity of faith-based organizations that participate directly and indirectly in government social service programs. Congress and federal agencies should continue to resist attempts to deny religious organizations the right to use religious belief as a factor in employment decisions.

4. Recognize that religious organizations and government are allies in the pursuit of civil society. For the sake of the nation’s future health, public policy should seek to honor and encourage the vast resources of family and religion. Reintegrating religious practice into American life while simultaneously protecting and respecting the rights of non-practice is one of the nation’s most important tasks. Research clearly demonstrates that regular religious practice is both an individual and social good. It is a powerful answer to many of our most significant social problems, some of which have reached catastrophic proportions. The practice of religion is good for individuals, families, states, and the nation. It improves health, learning, economic well-being, self-control, self-esteem, and empathy. It reduces the incidence of social pathologies, such as out-of-wedlock births, crime, delinquency, drug and alcohol addiction, health problems, anxieties, and prejudices.

Facts and Figures

- Regular life-long churchgoers tend to live an average of seven years longer than those who never attend church.
- Religious practice is related to emotional health. Research published in the *Journal of Social Issues* suggests that “religiousness is the second strongest inhibitor of...suicide attempts.”
- According to a study published in the *American Sociological Review*, children who, “at age 18, attend religious services with approximately the same frequency as their mothers” have “significantly better relationships” with their mothers five years later, as reported by the mothers.

Notes

■ Studies have linked more frequent church attendance to lower levels of divorce.

■ Married couples that pray together respect each other more, trust each other more, and are more helpful to each other around the house. According to Andrew Greeley's *Faithful Attraction: Discovering Intimacy, Love, and Fidelity in American Marriage*, "75 percent of those who pray say that the marriage is very happy, as opposed to 57 percent of those who do not pray."

■ Research shows that regular church attendance reduces the likelihood of violence toward a spouse.

■ Studies show that religion is related to levels of paternal involvement in "one-on-one engagement, dinner with one's family, and volunteering for youth-related activities," according to the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. In fact, "religion appears to make a unique contribution to paternal involvement" in the "specific attention that religious institutions dedicate to family life."

■ The Institute for Youth Development reports that "94 percent of teenagers say they believe in God" and "nearly 9 in 10 teens consider their religious beliefs important to them."

■ According to the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, a study of 10th graders revealed that "higher levels of involvement in church activities likely signifies...a motivation toward education that leads to better math and reading skills."

■ College students who scored high on a "spiritual well-being" scale exhibited healthier psychosocial profiles than their lower-scoring counterparts in areas of self-esteem, loneliness, marijuana use, alcohol use, and feelings of hopelessness.

■ A Gallup poll found that almost 70 percent of respondents "believe that faith-based organizations do the best job of helping youth in the community."

■ The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health "found that the active involvement of a caring adult is the best defense against delinquency, academic failure, substance abuse, and other problems" in adolescents.

Notes

Additional Reading

Joseph Loconte, "Why Religious Values Support American Values," Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 899, September 26, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/hl899.cfm.

Joseph Loconte and Lia Fantuzzo, *Churches, Charity and Children: How Religious Organizations Are Reaching America's At-Risk Kids*, Center for Research on Religion and

Urban Civil Society, 2002, at www.heritage.org/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=39395.

Patrick F. Fagan, "Why Religion Matters: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1064, January 25, 1996, at www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/BG1064.cfm.