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God Will Provide -- Unless the Government Gets There First

By [W. BRADFORD WILCOX](#)

Secularism seems to be on the march in America. This week, a new study from the Program on Public Values at Trinity College found that the number of Americans claiming no religion now stands at 15%, up from 8% in 1990 and 2% in 1962.

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.

Now, President Barack Obama seems poised to give secularism in America another boost, however inadvertently. This may come as a surprise to some, given Mr. Obama's outreach to religious voters last fall, his strong showing among them in the election and his eagerness to cultivate the faithful since. The White House has even been opening many of Mr. Obama's public appearances with a prayer, sometimes surpassing presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton in displays of public piety.

Nevertheless, the president's audacious plans for the expansion of the government -- from the stimulus to health-care reform to a larger role in education -- are likely to spell trouble for the vitality of American religion. His \$3.6 trillion budget for fiscal 2010 would bring federal, state and local spending to about 40% of the gross domestic product -- within hailing distance of Europe, where state spending runs about 46% of GDP. The European experience suggests that the growth of the welfare state goes hand in hand with declines in personal religiosity.

A recent study of 33 countries by Anthony Gill and Erik Lundsgaarde found an inverse relationship between religious observance and welfare spending. Countries with larger welfare states, such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, had markedly lower levels of religious attendance, affiliation and trust in God than countries with a history of limited government, such as the U.S., the Philippines and Brazil. Public spending amounts to more than one half of the GDP in Sweden, where only 4% of the population regularly attends church. By contrast, public spending amounts to 18% of the Philippines' GDP, and 68% of Filipinos regularly attend church.

"For many centuries, average citizens and local communities have often relied upon the support of religious organizations to meet their various social needs, including assistance for the poor, counseling in times of crisis and education for the young," explains Mr. Gill, a political scientist at the University of Washington. "But as the welfare state has expanded, many people have found that they can get these same services from the government without having to give a time commitment to the local church."

Other research indicates that religious giving also falls when the welfare state increases its spending. MIT economist Jonathan Gruber and Notre Dame economist Daniel Hungerman found that charitable spending by churches declined 30% in the wake of the New Deal and that nearly all of the decrease can be accounted for by increases in public spending in the 1930s. They conclude that "government spending does crowd out private charity, at least through churches."

A successful Obama revolution providing cradle-to-career education and cradle-to-grave health care would reduce the odds that Americans would turn to their local religious congregations and fellow believers for economic, social, emotional and spiritual aid. Fewer Americans would also be likely to feel obliged to help their fellow citizens through local churches and charities.

This is not to say that the health of the American religious sector depends only on some level of economic or social dislocation to attract people to congregations. Many Americans are religious for reasons that have nothing to do with the mutual aid found in churches and charities, such as the desire to be in a personal relationship with God or to keep faith with important family traditions. But the reasons for going to church are not so easily separated. And many of those who initially turn to religious organizations for mutual aid end up developing a faith that is as supernatural as it is material. But first they need to enter the door.

Mr. Wilcox is a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

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