

Is the Religious Right responsible for America's fading allegiance to religion?

Posted: Wed, 26th Feb 2014 by [Terry Sanderson](#)

Terry Sanderson on the Religious Right's baneful attempts to desecularize the United States with a raft of "religious freedom" bills.

There seems to be something of a disconnect in America between the rising number of people who profess to have no religion and the state legislatures that are falling over themselves to enact legislation that is little short of theocratic.

Research is repeatedly showing a sharp rise in the number of Americans who have no religion - the "nones" as they are known to academics who study the [changing dynamics of religion](#).

Many evangelical Christians have been comforting themselves with the idea that even though these "nones" don't associate themselves with a particular church, they are still Christians at heart who worship in their own way.

But David Voas, a sociologist at Essex University, begs to differ. He has found from his own research that the "fuzzy faithful" – those who claim to believe in some kind of unidentified higher power and perhaps go to church at Christmas – are really drifting towards complete indifference to religion and all its trappings.

In his 2008 paper *The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe*, Professor Voas concluded that those who sometimes define themselves as "spiritual but not religious" are actually more likely to be entirely indifferent to religion – a state of affairs that he says is much more dangerous for the future of religion than outright scepticism.

If the same pattern is repeating in America – and it seems to be – then the hope among evangelicals that the "nones" are really just non-practising, but faithful, Christians is little more than wishful thinking.

But despite this rapid secularisation of American culture, there are bills being brought forward in state legislatures that give mighty privilege to religious believers.

So-called "religious freedom" bills have been [proposed](#) in several states, but so far have only succeeded in completing the legislative process in Arizona. And even there the Governor still hasn't signed it into law. [Note: Since this blog was originally published, the Governor of Arizona has vetoed the bill].

But there are other battles over supposed "religious freedom" (which usually translates into religious privilege or the right to discriminate against gay people). The Catholic Church and its acolytes are fighting hard to destroy President Obama's flagship Affordable Healthcare legislation because they object to having to supply contraceptives.

Obama gave them an opt out that would relieve them of that duty, then he gave another one, but still they are not satisfied and continue to attack the Affordable Care Act in the courts. At present, a ruling on the matter is awaited from the Supreme Court.

And this is the problem with religious accommodation. Once one concession is made, another demand quickly follows. Religious hierarchies will never stop until they have complete control.

In Arizona the new law seeks to make it legal for businesses and individuals to deny services to gay people if doing so would offend their religious conscience. There could be all kinds of unintended consequences from this legislation (as well as it likely being unconstitutional).

So why is it happening? Why this sudden surge of bills seeking to give religion special privileges in American society? To get [religion back into schools](#), to control [what books can be read in colleges](#) (if they are deemed anti-religious) and to [promote creationism over evolution](#) in schools?

The answer is that the Republican Party – fused as it now is with the Religious Right – is seeking revenge for the success of gay marriage campaigns around the nation.

As it realises it has lost the war against gay marriage, the Religious Right seeks compensation in the form of "religious freedom" bills, the ultimate aim of which is to make sure gay marriage becomes impractical, despite being legalised.

By putting more and more barriers up against gay people achieving equal rights before the law, the Religious Right and its Republican representation in politics now seeks to make life almost impossible for gay couples in some parts of the country.

But this may end up being a case of making the same mistake twice.

During the last election campaign, the Republicans/Religious Right came to realise that the tide of history had turned against their opposition to gay marriage, and they pragmatically toned down the poisonous anti-gay rhetoric that had been so prominent on their previous electoral platform.

After being trounced again at the ballot box by Obama, they have regrouped and their new plan is to derail gay marriage wherever and however they can with these supposed "religious freedom" bills. But hiding behind the high-falutin' claims of "protecting the liberty of believers to practice their faith" lies rank bigotry.

If they imagine this is going to revive their fortunes they are sadly mistaken. Much of America was repelled by their vile homophobia last time, and it is unlikely it will be impressed with it this time.

The fanatic evangelicals with their hysterical televangelists and [lying propagandists](#) are turning off young people, not just from Republicanism, but from religion in general.

The "nones" are growing, but the Religious Right does not seem yet to have made the connection between that trend and their hate-mongering. They have made religion toxic and Americans are fleeing it in their thousands.

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Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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