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Religion and the Intelligentsia: Post-graduate Educated Americans 1990-2008

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The relationship between educational attainment and religious identity and behavior is contested in the academic literature. Both education and religion have been identified as independent variables. However, in general society, exposure to higher education is commonly regarded as a key explanatory factor in the decline or shift of an individual's religious loyalty and belief. As a result it is common for some conservative religious groups to discourage their adherents from seeking higher education. At the other extreme, secularists have long believed that more education produces more rationality and so liberates people from "superstition."

Over the past two decades the religious and demographic composition of Americans with post-graduate university degrees - master's degrees, doctorates and professional degrees - has changed even as the overall size of the group has grown. This paper will examine, using the large samples of ARIS time series, the changing religious profile and beliefs of the intelligentsia.

The case for looking at this segment is that there has been "grade inflation" across the nation. BAs are now so commonplace that they no longer constitute an elite, especially since the population with bachelor degrees is now so large.

The reason is that education has contrary associations with religious belief and practice. The findings contradict earlier studies that consistently find that people with more education are less likely than others to believe in God (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1997). On the other hand, it is frequently observed that religious participation (e.g. regular church attendance) in post-industrial societies is positively associated with both education and social class (Norris and Inglehart, 2004).

The question is why the association between education and religious affiliation - and possibly belief in God - is changing. Our hypothesis is as follows. When access to advanced education is restricted to very bright, well read, high academic achievers, post-graduates are disproportionately likely to report that they have no religion and do not believe in God, for the reasons mentioned above. As access to advanced education is broadened, however, not only the social but also the intellectual distinctiveness of graduates fades. People in advanced education are more like everyone else.

Our explanation rests on the combined effects of the expansion of access to advanced education and the drift away from religious adherence. In earlier times almost everyone had a religion, at least nominally. The small group of people who were overtly unreligious were mostly members of the middle class intelligentsia, hence the connection between educational qualifications and no religion. Many young people now do not have a religion, and at the same time a substantial proportion of this generation is entering advanced education. As a result the set of people who have no religion is expanding beyond the subpopulation that is highly educated, and that subpopulation is in any case losing its distinctiveness.

People with advanced education are disproportionately represented among both non-believers and churchgoers. We have explained how the changing distribution of religious types among elites and the general population produced this shift. In the mid-twentieth century a majority of graduates attended church, and hence they (or more accurately their children and grandchildren,

who were also very likely to have degrees) had further to travel before disclaiming even nominal affiliation. As a result, religious identity among the highly educated part of the population has not decayed more quickly than for those with fewer qualifications. The previously positive relationship between education and high school drop-outs has been reversed. It would be a mistake to infer, however, that a continued expansion of advanced education will produce a religious revival: both the post-graduate and the total populations are becoming slowly less religious over time.

Conclusions

The social composition of the elite has tended to normalize as it has expanded since 1990.

Change in the religious profile reflects general national trends i.e. rise of Nones. Catholics are a constant proportion so Nones have grown at expense of Mainline & Other Christians.

Religious involvement is typical of the national pattern but with increased public religiosity - membership of congregations and worship attendance. Evidence shows they "do" their religion more than most Americans - more belonging & behavior & only slightly less belief.

The worldviews do not exhibit unique patterns. Theologically there are slightly more agnostics and fewer don't knows.

The only sign of greater secularization is more support for the theory of human evolution but there is no evidence of a dominant "atheistic naturalism".

The elite is not a unique population today on most standard measures of religious belonging, belief and behavior.

This population as whole is a "people's elite" with few differences between them and the mass of the public except in terms of status, power and income.

Southernization and feminization has normalized the population.

The recent proliferation of religious and sectarian colleges may have offset some secularization trends.

The elite population is diverse rather than cohesive. This suggests the need to segment it by disciplinary field if we are to see real effects of some types of advanced education.

The most researched group within the elite, the university academics, are an unrepresentative sub-class within the elite.

Little evidence the majority of elite are in the Enlightenment tradition of Jefferson & Franklin.

Advanced education in U.S. does not seem to produce much skepticism or critical thinking

Some support for Andrew Gelman's (2009) which documents the stark partisan division within the American upper class, which I think helps us understand what's really going on. Very roughly, churchgoing non-coastal rich people are Republicans, while the more secular coastal rich are Democrats.

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