



Social Conservatism, Millennials, and the Future

Readers of the *Mindszenty Report* understand that America is engaged in a long ongoing cultural war. This struggle for America's soul is over more than just electing right-thinking people to office. It's a struggle over maintaining fundamental political and social values necessary for a well-ordered nation.

Since the 1960s the progressive left has waged a cultural war. This war has intensified in the last few years, with states such as New York and Illinois having enacted laws allowing abortion up to the time of birth. Schoolchildren are given graphic novels (i.e., cartoon books) about homosexual affairs. Public libraries have been opened to transgender drag queens who have children sit on their laps while they tell them that there is no such thing as clear gender identities.

Social conservatives are fighting back, and will continue to fight back, but there should be no denying that the progressive agenda is advancing step by step. In the last half-century, major institutions have been taken over by progressives: mainstream media, the entertainment industry, most K-12 education and higher education, and much of organized religion. Most disturbing is the impression that the progressive agenda is winning our younger generation over politically and culturally.

The *Mindszenty Report* has covered the tug-of-war for the younger generation (see, e.g., the June 2015 issue). We believe it's time to revisit this topic of our nation's youth. It's mostly bad news, but the cultural war is not over. Christ has a message of salvation and hope, and as Christians we remain faithful in the power of this message.

A Lost Generation?

A recent *WSJ/NBC* survey showed a steep drop among Millennials and older members of Gen-Z in valuing patriotism, family and religion. These results should be a wake-up call for social conservatives.¹ From

all appearances, the younger generation is being lost. Of course, every older generation believes that the youth are not up to the task of taking over and leading the nation. The *WSJ/NBC* survey suggests that in the case of today's youth, anxiety is warranted.

The survey conducted by Republican pollster Bill McInturff and Democratic pollster Jeff Horwitt showed that what Americans held dear twenty years ago is changing with today's youth. In particular, values concerning patriotism, commitment to religion, and the goal of having children are changing within the overall American population, largely due to changing values among the Millennial generation (born 1981-1996) and older members of Gen-Z (born 1997-2012). When asked about the importance of patriotism, 61 percent of all those surveyed cited patriotism as very important to them. This was a decline of 9 percentage points from a similar survey in 1998. These views on patriotism reflected a generational divide. A huge majority of people 55 and older (nearly 80 percent) held that patriotism was very important to them.

What value did the younger generation place on patriotism? A lot less. Only 42 percent said patriotism was important to them. The survey does not examine the causes of why younger people are less patriotic than the older generation. We can only surmise the "Why?" More young people are going to college than ever and the youth today have a materially better life than any generation before them. Some of the patriotism gap between the young and the old might be ascribed to the U.S.'s seemingly endless wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, although most of the young have not been involved in the actual fighting of these wars. But there is probably more to this gap than just recent wars.

Any conjecture about indifference to patriotism among our youth should begin with our educational system. Today many schools do not require classes to say the Pledge of Allegiance. In fact, many students do not even know the

words to the Pledge of Allegiance. Civics is not required in many states, and when it is taught, those teaching it have come out of colleges and departments of education that place little importance on traditional patriotic values. Patriotism has been replaced by social justice. American history has become a one-time course for most students in today's schools, taught by teachers who do not know much American history themselves and view American history as a story of victimhood and oppression. Students are more likely to know about racism, sexism and white male privilege than about those who sacrificed their lives to preserve freedom.

Bring Back Civics

Most of the American history textbooks used in today's schools and colleges emphasize oppression. They are quick to show how American ideals were not lived up to in reality or were false to begin with. This is clearly the intent of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of America*, which is required reading in many high school history classes and Advanced Placement history courses. This is not an exaggeration.

Zinn is the inspiration behind the current campaign to abolish Columbus Day and replace it with "Indigenous Peoples Day" in many high schools. In October 2018, sixty cities, including San Francisco, Cincinnati and Rochester, NY, replaced Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. Six states currently do not recognize Columbus Day. In making the case to abolish Columbus Day, high school teachers cite the Zinn narrative about the Columbus the genocidal discoverer of America.² Anyone interested in Zinn's distortion of American history should read Mary Grabar's excellent *Debunking Howard Zinn* (2019). Before Zinn died in 2010, his textbook had sold over 2 million copies. He died a millionaire.

The *New York Times* recently launched its "1619 Project," a left-wing revisionist account of American history, aimed to reveal to students that America was built on slavery, racism and white privilege. The project dates the founding of America to 1619 when the first black slaves were introduced to the North America continent. In the 1619 account the U.S. Constitution was a device created by white male slaveholders to protect their property (slaves). Any talk at the Philadelphia Convention of liberty, a constitutional republic, or rights was only a ploy to protect slavery as a property right.³ Leading scholars have ripped the 1619 narrative apart, but the *Times* is intent on selling its product, a written narrative and videos of left-wing historians, to classrooms across the country.⁴

Serious American historians have debunked the 1619 Project, though they are mostly from an older generation of historians. Most of them lean left politically, but they have a respect for the facts of American history and understand the complexities of history. Relying on these older historians, however, has its own limitations because today's younger generation of college history teachers increasingly declare themselves as "activist-scholars" who denounce traditional history as a recounting of privileged nostalgia.

The fight to restore a genuine appreciation of American history—its ideals, achievements and struggles—should begin with more state legislatures and school districts requiring the teaching of American history and civics. Specific requirements should be set to ensure that students gain an understanding of basic facts. Parents should demand that teachers consider such books as William McClay's *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (2019), a textbook that does not lecture students but invites them to understand the complexity of American history.

Any Hope for Religious Renewal?

While young Americans have become less patriotic, they have also become less religious. Only half of Americans in the *WSJ/NBC* survey cited religion as important to them.⁵ This was a 12-point drop from the similar 1998 survey. Among those 55 and older, two-thirds placed religion as very important to them, while fewer than one-third of the younger group did so.

This attitude of the young toward religion was borne out in a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2018 and 2019.⁶ In many ways, the Pew survey is even grimmer than the *WSJ/NBC* survey mentioned above. Four in ten Millennials (aged 23-38) declared that they are religiously unaffiliated, as compared with five in ten who identify as Christian. For this generation there is little relationship between morality and religion, even though there is abundant—overwhelming, in fact—social science research that shows regular church attendance makes for better lives, better marriages, more successful children, less drug and alcohol addiction, and more success in education and financial betterment. Students won't learn these facts in the classroom. More likely, they will learn that religion causes wars, Christians enslaved blacks, and religion is another form of bigotry.

There is no doubt that the Millennial generation is more secular, less religious; more self-centered; and less family-oriented than previous generations.

Before social conservatives throw up their hands, however, and retreat into an embattled remnant, historical perspective provides a context for understanding religious culture today. In its short history, America has experienced four great religious revivals: the First Great Awakening (1730-45); the Second Great Awakening (1800-1840); the Third Great Awakening (1870-1920); and what might be called the Fourth Great Awakening (1970-2000).⁷ Each of these revivals involved both Protestants and Catholics. These revivals followed a similar pattern of growth and decline.

The revivals erupted unexpectedly and drew huge numbers of people awakened by their faith in salvation. The first stages of these revivals threw established churches into confusion and eventually accommodation. Over time these spiritual awakenings faded as the next generation emerged and younger people did not share the religious enthusiasm of their parents. Those faithful who remained, and the younger who joined—smaller in number—became more intense and active in their faith.

Religious Awakenings in the Past

The First Great Awakening set the stage for the American Revolution and the founding of the United States. At the defense of Boston, early in the revolution, the newly sworn officers made a pilgrimage to Newbury, where they dug up the bones of the great revivalist George Whitefield and held his bones, as officers were blessed by a local minister.

In the Second Great Awakening the Christian faithful were central to the abolitionist movement that continued after the peak of the revival. Similarly, at the end of the religious revival of the late 19th century, religious enthusiasts played critical roles in the Progressive movement and the Prohibition crusade. (The Progressive Party convention in 1912, which nominated Theodore Roosevelt, opened with the singing of “Onward Christian Soldiers.”) The last great religious revival in modern America began in the 1970s, leading to the rise of the Religious Right, which included evangelical Protestants and traditional Catholics. These voters became a key constituency for social conservatives seeking to win public office.

Those Americans who identify themselves as Christian, attend church regularly and whose religious faith influences their voting behavior tend to be intense in their faith and politics. The evangelical Protestant vote remains crucial to the Republican Party, especially in the primaries. And not just in the South. In the 2016 primaries, self-identified

evangelicals made up 50 percent of voters in Mississippi, 47 percent in Alabama and 35 percent in North Carolina, but evangelical voters also constituted nearly a quarter of Minnesota voters, a third of Ohio voters and a fifth of Illinois voters. Moreover, evangelical Protestant and Catholic voters tend to be more conservative on social issues. In 2016, close to 40 percent of evangelical Protestants opposed same-sex marriage, as did 31 percent of white Catholics and 33 percent of Hispanic Catholics.⁸

Young Christians Are More Conservative

So where do today’s Millennials fit into this picture? Younger Millennial Christians (Protestants and traditional Catholics) tend to be even more socially conservative than the older religious generation, expressing stronger opposition to abortion and LGBT rights.⁹ As a consequence, these younger Christians are more intense in their faith and politics. In this respect, today’s young generation of social conservatives follow the earlier pattern of activists in past religious revivals in which the faithful remnant become even more committed to social change, as seen in the abolitionist and temperance movements, or Teddy Roosevelt’s Progressive Party.

Millennials declaring themselves socially conservative today stand outside their peers who find facile acceptance of the mantra of “social justice.” It takes a certain mindset, what sociologist David Riesman called an “inner directed” personality, to reject the mores of one’s peers. Furthermore, the younger generation has witnessed the destructive consequences of the breakdown of the family, drug addiction and secular values. These young social conservatives are not only true believers, but also witnesses to the collapse of traditional culture.

The majority of younger evangelical Protestants self-identify as conservative, while a striking 54 percent of white Catholics under 30 declare themselves Republican. Although the number of Millennials joining evangelical Protestant churches or traditional Catholic parishes has fallen, large numbers are declaring their faith. Often this expression of faith comes after marriage and children. They are motivated by faith and a sense of community. While some join small congregations, most participate in larger churches and parishes.

These larger churches and parishes provide a strong sense of community and social services from parochial schools, Sunday schools and an array of programs. Child-care services are especially important for young families. In addition, large churches offer groups for expecting

and young mothers to gather socially and share advice. Parents with school-age children can enroll their kids in sports and after-school programs. Mothers and fathers become coaches. Larger churches and parishes are reaching out to young non-churchgoers in their communities to offer free programs ranging from financial advice to drug rehabilitation. Such programs offer a different approach from proselytizing. This suggests that the future of Christian institutions might rest in larger churches and parishes, while smaller congregations do their part.

Young Americans will prove decisive in the ongoing cultural war. Social conservatives need not be dismayed. Opinions of young people today are likely not the same as they will be tomorrow. While many Millennials lack religious affiliation, about half consider themselves Christian and affiliated with a church. Indeed, close to 40 percent identify themselves as evangelical Protestant or Roman Catholic. College-educated Millennials tend to be the most religiously unaffiliated. Yet the largest decline in support for unrestricted abortion has come from the 18-to-29 age group. The majority of Millennials believe in legal abortion only under certain circumstances, a positive sign.¹⁰

The long cultural war continues. There are positive signs that social conservatism can influence American youth. It's a formidable challenge. The education industry, the media, Hollywood and politicians selling progressive indoctrination are arrayed against fundamental human instincts of protecting life, maintaining social and cul-

tural order, placing country over self, and committing oneself to addressing serious social problems instead of mouthing social justice abstractions.

The real world of hard work, taxes, and family and community life replaces—for most people—the foibles of youth. Kids grow up eventually. Let's hope it's sooner rather than later with the youth of today.

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- 1 Chad Day, "Americans Have Shifted Dramatically on What Values Matter Most," *Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2019.
 - 2 <https://www.thecollegefix.com/howard-zinn-lied-about-christopher-columbus-heres-how/>.
 - 3 Richard Lowry, "The Flagrant Distortions and Subtle Lies of the '1619' Project," *National Review*, October 7, 2019.
 - 4 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>; and James Barrett, "Historians Shred NYT's '1619 Project' That Claims Slavery Defines America," *The Daily Wire*, December 2, 2019.
 - 5 Chad Day, op.cit.
 - 6 <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>; <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/>.
 - 7 The best account of the American tradition of religious revivalism remains William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakening, and Reform* (1980).
 - 8 Donald T. Critchlow, *Future Right: Forging a New Republican Majority* (2016), pp. 177-205.
 - 9 Paul Taylor, *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (2014); Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (2007); and Pew Research Center, *America's Changing Religious Landscape* (May 12, 2015).
 - 10 Jeanne Mancini, "This Is the Pro-life Generation," *Real Clear Politics*, May 2, 2018.
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