

Religion in America | A1 Sample Answer

What was the significance of religion in modern American culture? (2011 Topic 6 Q 4)

Officially, the United States is a secular state. This means it has no set state religion. It also means there should be no support for any specific religious group or denomination from the state. Religious freedom and the separation of church and state are large elements of the American Constitution. However, regardless, religion has always played a large role in society and even in politics. Coins and monetary notes all state 'in God we trust' and you must swear an oath on the bible in a courtroom before presenting evidence ("so help me God").

Protestants make up over 50% of the population in America. There is no specific protestant group that is in the majority and the population of Protestants is instead made up of numerous smaller denominations. Most are Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans and different Pentecostal churches. Mormons, Christian Scientists and the Assemblies of God are American religions specifically. A high percentage of Americans are fundamentalists and call themselves Evangelical or born again Christians. Traditionally, US politics and society have been dominated by the wealthy, white Protestants, loosely referred to as white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The most important thing for a politician to be was to be white and protestant. Only two US presidents have ever not been both white and protestant; JFK, who was catholic, and Obama, who is black. Catholics are the largest single religious group in the US and they make up 25% of the population. Christians in the north tend to be liberal minded both socially and culturally but southern and mid-west Americans in the Bible belt areas tend to be more conservative and fundamentalist in nature. Jews are the third largest religious group in America and the US has the largest population of Jews anywhere in the world. There are around 5-6 million Jews living in America. Muslims have been growing in numbers too and the number started growing around the mid-sixties with the Black Nation of Islam.

After World War Two, America was an incredibly religious state. For example, in the 1950s, 95% of Americans believed in God and church attendance was at 40%. Nearly 70% of the population belonged to a church. Church and family were promoted as pillars of morality for the American public in a world that was rapidly modernising. Religion was also used in relation to the widespread fear of the growing threat of

communism. Communism is an Atheist system and this fact was demonised under McCarthyism. The fight against what became known as ‘Godless communism’ was supported by most religious institutions and the majority of their followers. Organisations such as Billy James Hargis’ Christian Crusade and Fred Schwarz’s Christian Anti-Communist Crusade relentlessly attacked communism and called it immoral. This hyped up the importance of religion for many Americans. It helped sustain anti-communist paranoia during this period. Religion was seen as a way of being patriotic. Evangelical preachers gained numerous followers and they denounced the affluence and consumerism of the 1950s. They called drinking, smoking, gambling, swearing and dancing sins and attracted many fundamentalist followers.

Religion declined considerably in the 1960s. The rising affluence among the general public led to church attendance declining. This continued through the 70s and 80s. Religion began to have less importance in people’s lives and the role played by religion was menial at best. Baby boomers especially became disinterested. Up to 40% of people abandoned religion entirely. The sexual revolution, caused by the introduction and normalisation of the contraceptive pill, scandalised the conservative population. They were also perturbed by counter culture such as rock and roll. Youths rejected religion as being part of the ‘establishment’. The Supreme Court adopted the belief that it should support liberation and that people should be given more freedom to do what they liked in their own homes. This was allied with feminism. Conservative Americans grew worried at the loss of traditional values, correlating increases in crime rates, growth of feminism and women’s liberation, and soaring divorce rates. They were worried that the lessening role of religion was playing a part in this. Older people started going to church more often and promoting patriotism in response to counter culture. Anti-Catholic sentiments also rose in the sixties after the election of JFK. It was suspected that he was secretly allowing the pope to run the state and this caused much suspicion among conservatives.

In the 1970s, there was an even greater conservative backlash in the name of religion. This led to the creation of a powerful religious political movement known as the Religious Right or the Christian Right. This movement was dominated by evangelical Protestants who had avoided politics up until this point but felt that it was their duty to ‘save’ America from debauchery. They did not believe in the separation of church and state and saw it as government hostility towards religion. Prayer and bible reading was banned in state schools and they were not allowed teach creationism according to the Supreme Court. They were also against the fact that the state refused to give funding or grants to private religious schools. They also felt that the tax exemption rules for charitable organisations were unfair; charities were allowed a tax exemption

provided they did not discriminate. Many Christian schools were incredibly racist but still managed to cheat the system. For example, Bob Jones University only admitted blacks in 1971 and did not allow inter-racial dating but still got funding from the state. The Religious Right mostly identified as Born Again Christians and was predominately white, middle class Protestants. They were anti-abortion, anti-divorce, anti-birth control- anti-gay, anti-feminist and often racist. A new group, known as the Moral Majority, also came about in the seventies. These were very powerful and wealthy and had an important influence on state laws. Ronald Reagan was a born again Christian and was elected president with backing from Jerry Falwell, a preacher for this right wing religious groups.

The movement was weakened in later years by a series of scandals involving televangelists. Jimmy Bakker was forced to resign from his club 'Praise the Lord' after he was revealed to be having an affair with his secretary. It then came to light that he had been stealing money from his own business to fund his luxurious lifestyle. Jimmy Swaggart was another televangelist who was disgraced after he openly said on air that he had been with a prostitute. He was then expelled from his church. Critics labelled them hypocrites left, right and centre. In 1987, Falwell left the Moral Majority after many arguments. The movement was dissolved in 1989 but was then replaced by the Christian Coalition of America.

In 1989, the US was clearly still a very religious society despite many setbacks. There had been some decline in church attendance but the majority of Americans still went at least once a month. 40% went to church every week. 75% of people still described themselves as being religious and nearly 70% said they were members of their local church. This fact hadn't even changed since 1950. While there were a lot of disagreements about the issues of abortion, the Religious Right, and gay rights, religion still played a central role in US culture and everyday life.