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RELIGION AND PHILANTHROPY: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

By Bill Stanczykiewicz

The link between religion and philanthropy in the United States has a long and enduring history. As the year-end religious holidays approach, fundraisers could be wondering if a decline in religion will lead to a decline in charitable giving.

The close relationship between religion and charity in this land dates back at least to 1630 when pastor John Winthrop exhorted his congregation with a sermon entitled, “A Modell of Christian Charity.” While Benjamin Franklin and others later offered a secular rationale for philanthropy, the connection between religious belief and philanthropic behavior has been consistent through the centuries.

That is why data from the Pew Research Center is noteworthy. The center’s survey of 35,000 Americans reveals that religious affiliation in the United States is declining. In 1972, 95 percent of Americans responded that they were affiliated with religion. In 2016, that number has dropped to 77 percent.

According to Alan Cooperman, director of religion research at the Pew Research Center, the rise of the so-called “nones” – people with no religious affiliation – could have an impact on nonprofits. Cooperman’s data reveal that religiously affiliated people are more than twice as likely to be involved with a charitable organization than non-religiously affiliated people. In addition, two-thirds of highly-religious people made a charitable donation in the last week compared with 41 percent of those who are not highly-religious.

Cooperman believes that religion is just part of the story, and he speculates that an overall deterioration in community life – think Robert Putnam and “bowling alone” – might be driving the reduction in religious affiliation. That decline could impact philanthropy.

“Religious people are more likely to invite you to their church, temple or mosque, but they also are more likely to donate or volunteer at your local little league,” Cooperman explained during the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving’s Distinguished Visitor program.

“Joiners are joiners,” he continued. “People who are more active in religious organizations are more likely to be involved in other community organizations. This could be due, in part, to their religious teaching, but this also could be because of a disposition to be involved with community organizations.”

The downward trend in religious affiliation especially is pronounced among millennials in comparison with their ancestors. Consider the so-called “silent generation,” people born between 1928 and 1945. When these folks were in their 20s and 30s, only 11 percent were not religiously affiliated. Compare that with today’s millennials: 35 percent claim no religious affiliation.

Cooperman notes that millennials are not likely to change course and join their ancestors at higher rates of religious activity. “No generation since the start of the 20th Century has become more religiously affiliated as they age,” Cooperman said. “In fact, each generation becomes less religiously affiliated over time.”

Dr. David King, director of the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, says fundraisers need to take note of these trends but not panic. At least not yet.

“While we are not certain, the research shows that many people who now claim no religious affiliation were relatively inactive with religious communities in the first place,” King said. “They might have been attending religious service once a month or maybe twice a year, and now not at all. This leads us to believe that the decline in religious affiliation does not necessarily mean we can expect a drastic decline in today’s charitable giving. How this impacts future generations remains an open question.”

King added that the subject of religion and philanthropy is complex. Religion is not a prerequisite for charity, and many non-religious people donate generously for secular reasons. At the same time, many of the “nones” maintain religious beliefs and practices that motivate their charitable giving.

As he analyzes the fluctuations in religious affiliation, King also cites evidence from Giving USA demonstrating that overall charitable giving and donations to religion are at record levels, even after adjusting for inflation.

“The historic level of charitable giving has occurred at the same time as the decline in religious affiliation,” King said. “While we need to monitor these trends into the future, the rise of the ‘nones’ has not yet prevented a rise in charitable giving.”

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