

NY Times columnist sees worth of institutionalized religion

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Ross Douthat, the youngest op-ed columnist ever employed by The New York Times, shared his views Monday night about the decreasing role of institutional Christianity in the last 40 years and its acceleration in the last two decades.

In an event titled "Moral Majority to Moral Minority: Politics in a De-Christianizing America" in the Douglass Campus Center, he said the sexual revolution and the development of birth control pills during the 1960s caused Catholics to reconsider the role of the Vatican in their lives.

"The pill gave women more control over their lives and stability that made Catholic morals and ethics seems more and more unnecessary," Douthat said.

His past columns admonished the media for being too harsh on Sarah Palin, criticized President Barack Obama's policies and proposed stricter immigration laws.

Douthat, who is also the film critic for National Review magazine and a published author, calls himself a conservative thinker. He does not support gay marriage or the recently passed health care bill and would like to see Roe v. Wade overturned.

"Globalization also introduced Americans to different ways of approaching their daily lives," he said. "The sexual abuse by many of the priests and others members of the Catholic Church produced a lot of dissatisfaction."

Waning institutional Christianity brings consequences, Douthat said. Churches in the early and mid-20th century were an integral part of society and culture. People went to church regularly and had a religious framework to define social goals and the direction of the nation.

"The decline of religious culture can't just be measured in the huge drops in attendance to Protestant, Methodist and Catholic churches in America," Douthat said. "Church budgets have diminished, donations to churches are much less and the student populations at seminaries have greatly decreased."

Douthat attributed the strength of the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war protests to institutional Christianity. He said it aided immigrants with assimilation and settling into America and worked to ensure the sanctity of marriage and families.

Weakening of institutional religion in the United States gave way to the phenomenon of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), Douthat said. Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton conducted a 2005 study called, "National Study of Youth and

Religion," showing a substantial majority of teenagers seeing themselves as religious believers in Jesus Christ.

Smith and Denton consistently found in the thousands of interviews they conducted that teenagers today lack depth in their understanding of religion, he said.

Some chief tenets of MTD are that God created the world and watches over it, be nice and fair to everyone and respect all religions and be happy and feel good, Douthat said.

"God doesn't have to be a constant presence in one's life, except when one has a problem, and good people go to heaven," he said. "Basically, just don't be an a—hole."

Implications of MTD, which stresses stability, contentment and not bothering anyone, allowed two main battles in the culture war, abortion and gay rights, Douthat said.

"Abortion opponents can argue that abortion is icky and mean to the fetus and therefore does not make anyone feel good," he said. "It's harder for opponents of gay rights to pass the guideline of MTD, because to deny rights to a particular group can be seen as being an a—hole."

Advantages of MTD include tolerance and an openness that absolves one of the desire to impose their beliefs onto others, but a consequence is mellow faith, Douthat said. MTD produces people who are self-satisfied, creating hubris where people consider only their happiness when making decisions.

"This sort of hubris is illustrated by [former] President George W. Bush's worst days in office," he said. "It also creates a complacent mindset that will comfort the comfortable, and brushes over problems that require difficult choices and change."

When speaking about the alarm of conservatives reacting to the de-Christianizing of America, Douthat said conservatives were victims who addressed a reasonable concern. He said secular liberals were paranoid and excessive.

"Alarmist liberals panic that religion breeds nationalism and could create an 'American Taliban,'" Douthat said. "They fear that the power of evangelical religion is dangerous and imagine Sen. Pat Roberts [R-Kan.] as the Ayatollah Khomeini and Sarah Palin as [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad."

Only a few decades ago, a religious right did not exist, as pro-life and opposing gay rights doctrines were mainstream ideals before, Douthat said.

"The increased profile of the religious right led to a backlash amongst the youth," he said.

Douthat ended the session with a remark about the ongoing budget conflict in Congress. He said the Democrats' desire to raise taxes and the Republicans' preference for lower spending are being used as political tools.

He said Obama and the Democrats are doing a terrible job with the budget. Since it's disadvantageous to discuss raising taxes, Democrats keep spending at the current level and are more scared to talk about raising taxes than Republicans are of talking about cutting spending.

"This causes the Republicans to go out on a limb and cut programs, and then the Democrats say the Republicans are hurting Americans when really the Democrats are unwilling to offer a solution themselves," he said.

It was Douthat's nuanced conservatism that inspired Eagleton Institute of Politics Director Ruth Mandel to ask him to speak at the University.

"We wanted someone who would inspire fresh viewpoints and a lively exchange," Mandel said. "We knew that Douthat's thoughts on politics and religion would be provocative and inspire different opinions."

Saheli Sarkar, a School of Social Work sophomore, said Douthat was one of the best speakers he's ever listened to at the University.

"He was smart without ever being condescending," he said. "I don't think I would agree with the decline of religious institutions in America, but I do agree that American youth is becoming too complacent and less willing to organize and work toward real change."

