

National Secularity, Individual Religiosity, and Human Flourishing

by David G. Myers

When I first read the Dawkins/Harris/Hitchens “new atheist” argument—that all religions are “dangerous” (as well as false)—I thought: these guys are ill-informed. To counter their stories of religion’s horrors we have stories of religion’s heroes—from the anti-slavery movement’s leaders to the founders of universities, hospitals, and hospices. Moreover, we now have massive new social science data showing religion’s associations with human happiness, health, and helpfulness. And thus was born the impulse to pen *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on Why God is Good and Faith Isn’t Evil*.

But for us religious folk there is, amid the feel-good results, a troubling fact of life. If you were to be relocated to another country, and wished it to be a civil, safe, healthy place, you should hope for a relatively *irreligious* place—perhaps a Scandinavian country, or maybe Australia, Canada, or the Netherlands. Indeed, notes sociologist Phil Zuckerman in *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment* and related essays, countries with the highest rates of happiness, life expectancy, literacy, income,

gender equality, and education are relatively secular. So are the countries with the lowest rates of homicide, infant mortality, AIDS, and teen pregnancy. “The Virtues of Godlessness,” trumpeted one of his articles.

Such analyses have been faulted for cherry-picking both their social health measures (for example, excluding suicide) and their countries (omitting, North Korea, China, Vietnam, and the former Soviet states). Instead, they focus on secular countries whose values were shaped by a Judeo-Christian heritage.

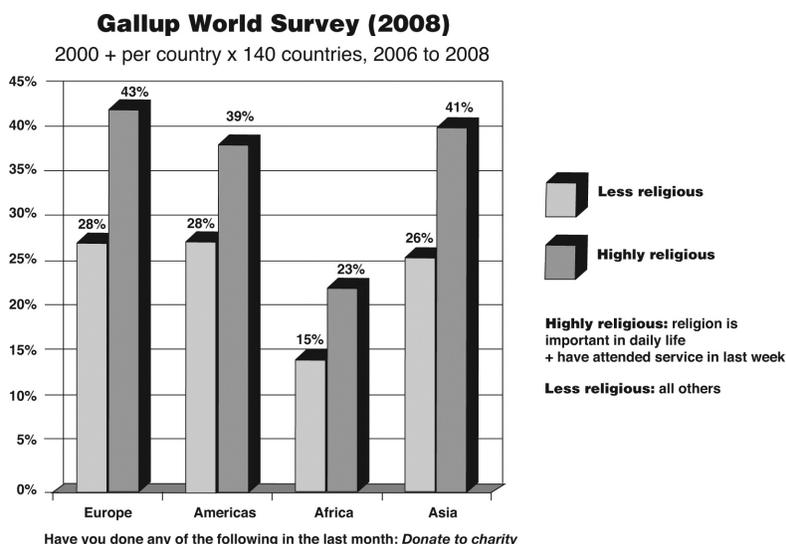
Still, Zuckerman has a point, as I confirmed by harvesting new Gallup survey data from 152 countries. Countries where most people say that religion is *not* an important part of their daily life and where most people have *not* attended religious services in the last week, tend to be countries where people report high quality of life. Folks in highly religious countries (think Pakistan, Uganda, the Philippines) mostly rate their lives well below the best possible life.

In *A Friendly Letter*, I extended this association between secularity and the good life by comparing U.S. states. The Southern states all have higher religious-adherence rates than do the West Coast states. They also have slightly higher divorce rates, and much higher crime, teen pregnancy, and smoking rates. So, by some measures, it again looks like the *least* religious places are the healthiest and most civil. Ouch.

States and countries vary in many ways, including not only religiosity but also literacy and education, culture and ethnicity, and income and financial security. When we compare countries or states—comparing all such things at once—we risk



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committing the “ecological fallacy,” which the forthcoming *Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology* defines as “The inference that what is true of group members in general is true of a particular individual who is a member of that group.” The more telling story is told at the level of individuals’ life experience. And, ironically, the correlations across individuals run the other direction. Although religion comes in both healthy and toxic forms, religiously engaged *individuals*, on balance, tend to be happier, healthier, more generous, less crime-prone, and less often involved with premature sexuality and pregnancy.

Consider happiness. Ed Diener, the world’s leading happiness researcher, tells me that the negative correlation across nations between religiosity and life satisfaction disappears when controlling for income, and that “religious people have higher life satisfaction in most every nation.” So it is in the countries for which I have examined data. For example, in the National Opinion Research Center’s repeated “General Social Survey” of 47,909 Americans since 1972, “very happy” people ranged from 26 percent of those who never attended a religious service up to 48 percent of those attending more than once a week.

Likewise, the most religiously engaged Americans were half as likely as never-attenders to be divorced and about one-fourth as likely to smoke or have been arrested. Thus, highly religious *states* have higher divorce, smoking, and arrest rates, but high-

ly religious *individuals* have lower—much lower—divorce, smoking, and arrest rates.

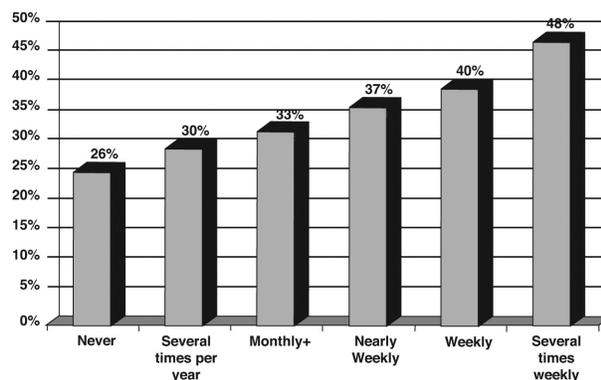
Consider, also, who is most generous with their money and time. Many American surveys have found worship attendance to be a major predictor of generosity. In one earlier Gallup survey, 46 percent of “highly spiritually committed” Americans volunteered with the infirm, poor, or elderly, as did only 22 percent of those “highly uncommitted.” Robert Putnam, of *Bowling Alone* fame, tells me that, even after controlling for other factors, religiously engaged

Americans are more involved in community, in giving to secular organizations, and in volunteering (as I believe he will be reporting in his forthcoming book, *American Grace*).

Gallup finds the same to be true worldwide. Across regions and religions, faith-active people are most helpful. Compared to those less religious, the most religious (who say religion is important in their daily lives and who attended a service in the last week) are about 50 percent more likely to report having donated money to charity in the last month (see figure), volunteered time to an organization, and helped a stranger.

This consistent finding—that actively religious folks tend to be more humane than heartless—expresses the help-giving mandates found in all major religions, from Islamic alms-giving to Judeo-Christian tithing.

% Very Happy and Religious Attendance
 (General Social Survey, 1972-2008)

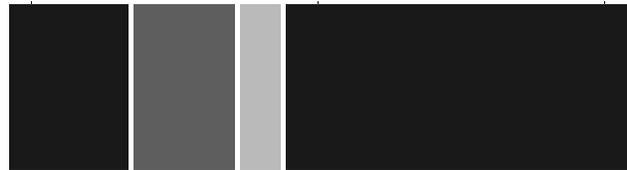


And then there's the oft-reported association between religious engagement and health. Several massive epidemiological studies have followed lives through time to see what predicts ill health and premature death. The well-replicated finding, which researchers have scrambled to explain, is that religiously active people are less likely to die in any given year and enjoy longer life expectancy. The faith-health correlation, which remains after controlling for age, gender, ethnicity, and education, appears partly as the result of religion-related healthier lifestyles (recall the lower smoking rate), and partly the result of faith-related communal support, stress management, and positive emotions.

I know, I know. Many people of faith die young, or are unhappy, self-centered, and bigoted. In surveys, evangelicals (compared to mainliners and the non-religious) have been more antagonistic toward gays, more likely to support torturing suspected terrorists, and more opposed to taxing themselves to support care for their neighbor's health and welfare. "Christians have given Christianity a bad name," lamented Madeline L'Engle. Indeed, the worst examples of anything—medicine, business, politics, science, religion, and even atheism (remembering the genocidal Mao, Pol Pot, and Stalin)—can make it look evil. But in general, actively religious people are healthy, happy, and civil.

I hasten to remind people: these data do not validate theism. The benefits of faith are irrelevant to its truth claims. And truth is ultimately what matters. (If theism's central claim is untrue, though comforting, what honest person would choose to believe? If true, though discomfiting, what honest person would disbelieve?)

But the data do challenge the anecdote-fueled new atheist argument that religion is an overriding force for evil. Moreover, they help us appreciate a spirituality that gives meaning to our lives, connects us in supportive communities, motivates morality and altruism, and offers hope in the face of adversity and death. ❖



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