America’s Blessings

How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists

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America’s Blessings
In 1630 the Pilgrim leader John Winthrop described his vision for a new North American society as “a shining city upon a hill,” a special nation blessed by God. Since then, this image of America has often been repeated by prominent Americans, especially by presidents, who have regarded it as intrinsic to American exceptionalism. It is an image that many liberals find embarrassing and many conservatives regard as self-evident—but nearly everyone admits one of its fundamental assumptions: America is an unusually religious nation. Nearly all Americans say they believe in God, about 80 percent believe in heaven, about 70 percent believe in hell, and half pray at least once a day (32 percent pray more than once).

Many American “intellectuals,” especially those who frequent faculty lounges and staff the national news media, regret these facts of our religious life. In doing so, they overlook a remarkable truth: Americans benefit immensely from being an unusually religious people—blessings that not only fall upon believers but also on those Americans who most oppose religion. In America, militant atheists are far less likely to have their homes broken into or to be robbed on their way to work than they would be in an irreligious society, because of the powerful deterrent effects of religion on crime. Moreover, religious people are the primary source of secular charitable funds that benefit all victims of misfortune whatever their beliefs. Indeed,
religious people dominate the ranks of blood donors, to whom even some angry humanists owe their lives.

It is past time for a full accounting of the tangible human and social benefits of faith in American society and for the recognition that one of our nation’s primary advantages over many others lies in the greater strength of religion in American life. As will be seen, this accounting is surprisingly easy because mountains of little-reported research and reliable data exist on a wide range of important religious effects. For example, compared to less religious and irreligious Americans,

- At all ages, religious people are much less likely to commit crimes.
- Religious Americans are far more likely to contribute even to secular charities, to volunteer their time to socially beneficial programs, and to be active in civic affairs.
- Religious Americans enjoy superior mental health—they are happier, less neurotic, and far less likely to commit suicide.
- Religious Americans also enjoy superior physical health, having an average life expectancy more than seven years longer than that of the irreligious. A very substantial difference remains even after the effects of “clean living” are removed.
- Religious people are more apt to marry and less likely to divorce, and they express higher degrees of satisfaction with their spouses. They also are more likely to have children.
- Religious husbands are substantially less likely to abuse their wives or children.
- Religious American couples enjoy their sex lives more and are far less likely to have extramarital affairs.
- Religious students perform better on standardized achievement tests.
- Religious Americans are far less likely to have dropped out
of school, which is especially true for African Americans and Hispanics.

- Religious Americans are more successful, obtaining better jobs and far less subject to being on unemployment or welfare; this is true not only for whites but for African Americans.
- Although often portrayed as ignorant philistines, religious Americans are more likely to consume and sustain “high culture.”
- Religious people are far less likely to believe in occult and paranormal phenomena such as Bigfoot, UFOs, Atlantis, ghosts, haunted houses, and astrology.

Translated into comparisons with Western European nations, we enjoy far lower crime rates, much higher levels of charitable giving, better health, stronger marriages, and less suicide, to note only a few of our benefits from being an unusually religious nation. Quite aside from the social and personal benefits of these religious effects, they add up to many hundreds of billions of dollars a year in financial benefits, as I demonstrate in the concluding chapter.

Unfortunately, many of these benefits have been disparaged or even denied, especially by academics. For example, as reported in chapter 5, it remains an article of faith among most psychologists that religion either contributes to mental illness or is itself a form of psychopathology, although the evidence shows overwhelmingly that religion protects against mental illness. In similar fashion, chapter 3 notes that many social scientists continue to claim that Evangelical Protestant husbands are wife beaters, despite a mountain of contrary research studies. And so it goes. But far more significant even than denial is simple neglect. For example, despite several hundred studies demonstrating strong religious effects on obeying the law, the word “religion” does not even appear in the index of fourteen of sixteen leading textbooks on criminology.
Some might suppose that this neglect of religious benefits is partly due to the fact that religion is rapidly declining even in America, and therefore its role in these matters lacks long-term significance. On March 17, 2009, USA Today ran a story headlined “Most Religious Groups in USA Have Lost Ground.” A month later the lead story in Newsweek announced “The End of Christian America.” Nonsense. Despite these frequent media claims, American religion is not declining. To the contrary, more Americans (70 percent) now belong to a local church congregation than ever before in our history.

Of course, a major reason for the neglect of religious benefits is the growing antagonism toward religion so carefully promulgated by the news media. Increasingly, zoning officials are preventing the construction of new churches and are prosecuting people who host small Bible-study groups weekly in their homes and who lack (unobtainable) licenses to hold public meetings. In addition, it has become fashionable to complain about religious buildings being exempt from property taxes and for religious contributions to be deductible. Some now suggest that these are forms of favoritism that violate the separation of church and state. But the underlying motivation for these complaints has far less to do with concerns about traffic, the need to increase government revenues, or interpreting the First Amendment than with contempt for religion and antagonism toward religious people.

Recently, in an article in the online edition of The Atlantic about former Arkansas governor and Fox Media host Mike Huckabee, associate editor Nicole Allan noted that “people are sometimes caught off guard by Huckabee’s intellectual competence because of . . . his outspoken evangelical views.” This remark reflects the prevailing view among journalists, openly stated by the prominent Michael Weisskopf in the Washington Post, that Evangelical Protestants are “poor, uneducated and easy to command.” Media people are ignorant of the fact that
the better educated they are, the more frequently Americans attend church,\(^4\) probably because no one they know is religious.\(^5\) A few years ago, a survey of journalists randomly selected from the most influential news organizations (the major TV networks, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the like) found that 50 percent listed their religion as “none” (for emphasis, some carefully underlined it) and 86 percent said they seldom or never went to church.\(^6\)

I can’t explain why there are so few religious people among journalists, but that has been the case for a long time. Except for his remarkable talent, H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) probably was not an oddity; most of his newsroom colleagues probably scoffed at religion, too. That certainly was how things were back when I was a writer for several major newspapers. If anything has changed since then, it would be that even fewer media people are religious, and those who are usually keep it to themselves. The lack of religious people in the media environment not only breeds contempt (“Smart people like us aren’t religious”) but also leads to invincible ignorance. For example, the idea that deeply religious couples have more active and satisfying sex lives than do the irreligious is simply inconceivable to elite media people, the majority of whom do not believe that adultery is wrong.\(^7\)

In what follows I make no claims that are not backed by good research studies or reliable data. What do I mean by good research? The primary factor in good social research has to do with sampling. For every published social scientific study based on a random sample of a relevant population, at least a dozen are based on accidental collections of people such as 142 students in an introductory psychology class at some junior college, or a random sample of a very unrepresentative population such as tattooed residents of Waco, Texas. It is impossible to place confidence in any nonexperimental research based on a grab bag of respondents, which is why the findings from such studies differ
so wildly—from reports that all churchgoing coeds are virgins to reports that there is not a virgin among them. I exclude all studies not based on well-selected samples of relevant populations, making only a few exceptions that I am careful to point out and justify.

Beyond sampling is analysis. Suppose a study of a well-selected national sample of teenagers reported that those who attend church are less likely to have shoplifted. But we know that girls are significantly less likely than boys to shoplift and girls also are more likely to attend church. So, is the initial finding a real religious effect, or is it the case that gender differences are masquerading as a religious effect? That is, when the relationship between church attendance and shoplifting is examined separately for boys and girls, is there still a religious effect? Yes, there is. Among both boys and girls, those who are religious are less likely to shoplift. That is an example of analysis. I only report studies that meet professional standards of analysis. In some instances, I present reliable data that no one has bothered to use to sustain an important point about the role of religion. In those instances, I also take the necessary analytic precautions.

Acknowledgments

Usually, I am a rather solitary scholar. But in this instance I enjoyed invaluable help from my colleagues at Baylor’s Institute for Studies of Religion. Byron Johnson offered continuing advice and kept the world at bay. Jeff Levin shared his encyclopedic knowledge of the effects of religion on psychological and physical health. Young-II Kim helped me deal with various data sets, including the enormous Gallup World Polls. And Frances Malone secured for me copies of studies published in various hard-to-get journals.

Thank you.
Most people probably believe that Colonial America was far more religious than the nation is today—their impressions strongly shaped by pictures of Puritans dressed in somber clothing on their way to church. But most colonists were not Puritans; Puritans were not even a majority of those aboard the Mayflower. In 1776 the overwhelming majority of colonists in America did not even belong to a local church. Only about 17 percent did so, and even in New England only 22 percent belonged. As for the somber Puritans, they wore plain, drab clothing only on Sunday. On other days they tended to favor bright colors. Those who “could afford it wore crimson waistcoats and expensive cloaks,” and the women wore jewelry and very fancy clothing at appropriate times. Moreover, from 1761 through 1800, a third (33.7 percent) of all first births in New England occurred after less than nine months of marriage, so single women in Colonial New England were more likely to engage in premarital sex than to attend church.

The very low level of religious participation that existed in the thirteen colonies merely reflected that the settlers brought with them the low level that prevailed in Europe. Then, as now, the monopoly state churches of Europe, fully supported by taxes and therefore having no need to arouse public support, were very poorly attended. This situation was not a new development. Contrary to another popular myth, medieval Europeans...
seldom went to church and were, at most, barely Christian.\textsuperscript{4} That state of affairs was not changed by the Reformation, which simply replaced poorly attended Catholic churches with poorly attended Protestant monopoly state churches.

In addition, some of the larger Colonial denominations, such as the Episcopalians and Lutherans, were overseas branches of state churches and not only displayed the lack of effort typical of such establishments but were also remarkable for sending disreputable clergy to minister to the colonies. As the celebrated Edwin S. Gaustad noted, there was constant grumbling by Episcopal (Anglican) vestrymen “about clergy that left England to escape debts or wives or onerous duties, seeing [America] as a place of retirement or refuge.”\textsuperscript{5} The great Colonial evangelist George Whitefield noted in his journal that it would be better “that people had no minister than such as are generally sent over . . . who, for the most part, lead very bad examples.”\textsuperscript{6}

In addition, most colonies suffered from having a legally established denomination, supported by taxes. The Episcopalians were the established church in New York, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. The Congregationalists (Puritans) were established in New England. There was no established church in New Jersey or Pennsylvania, and not surprisingly these two colonies had higher membership rates than did any other colony.\textsuperscript{7}

Therein lies a clue as to the rise of the amazing levels of American piety: competition creates energetic churches. As Adam Smith explained in 1776, established religions, being monopolies, inevitably are lax and lazy. In contrast, according to Smith, clergy who must depend upon their members for support usually exhibit far greater “zeal and industry” than those who are provided for by law. History is full of examples wherein a kept clergy “reposing themselves upon their benefices, had neglected to keep up the fervour of faith and devotion in the great body of the people; and having given themselves up to
indolence, were become altogether incapable of making any vigorous defence even of their own establishment.” Smith went on to note that the clergy of monopoly churches often become “men of learning and elegance,” but they have “no other resource than to call upon the civil magistrate to persecute, destroy, or drive out their adversaries.” Smith’s claims were fully demonstrated by the weakness of European Christianity. But the lazy colonial monopolies did not survive in the United States, being replaced by a religious free market in which Smith’s analysis was fully confirmed.

**Pluralism and Piety**

Following the Revolutionary War, state religious establishments were discontinued (although the Congregationalists held on as the established church of Massachusetts until 1833), and even in 1776 there was substantial pluralism building up everywhere. This increased rapidly with the appearance of many new Protestant sects—most of them of local origins. With all of these denominations placed on an equal footing, intense competition arose among the churches for member support, and the net result of their combined efforts was a dramatic increase in Americans’ religious participation. By 1850 a third of Americans belonged to a local congregation. By the start of the twentieth century, half of Americans belonged, and today about 70 percent are affiliated with a local church.

From the early days, people generally knew that competitive pluralism accounted for the increasingly great differences in the piety of Americans and Europeans. The German nobleman Francis Grund, who arrived in Boston in 1827, noted that establishment makes the clergy “indolent and lazy,” because

a person provided for cannot, by the rules of common sense, be supposed to work as hard as once who
has to exert himself for a living. . . . Not only have Americans a greater number of clergymen than, in proportion to the population, can be found on the Continent or in England; but they have not one idler amongst them; all of them being obliged to exert themselves for the spiritual welfare of their respective congregations. The Americans, therefore, enjoy a three-fold advantage: they have more preachers; they have more active preachers, and they have cheaper preachers than can be found in any part of Europe.¹⁰

Another German, the militant atheist Karl T. Griesinger, complained in 1852 that the separation of church and state in America fueled religious efforts: “Clergymen in America [are] like other businessmen; they must meet competition and build up a trade. . . . Now it is clear . . . why attendance is more common here than anywhere else in the world.”¹¹

But competition did not benefit all of the American denominations, as can be seen in Table 1.1; some were unable (or unwilling) to compete. It would be very misleading to compute market shares in 1776 and 1850 as a percentage of church members since the rate of church membership precisely doubled during this period. This problem is eliminated by basing market shares on the entire population, churched and unchurched. That also takes into account the rapid growth of the population during this same period. When population growth is ignored, all denominations appear to have been quite successful; even the Congregationalists nearly trebled their numbers, and the Episcopalians more than did so. But when market shares are examined, it becomes obvious that the Congregationalists and Episcopalians had suffered catastrophic losses. The Presbyterians had held their own. The Baptists had made an immense gain (from 29 per 1,000 to 70), and the Methodists had achieved an
incredible share of the religious marketplace, going from 2 per 1,000 to 116. During this era the Roman Catholics grew, too.

Table 1.1. Church Membership, 1776–1850

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<tr>
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<th>1776</th>
<th>1850</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total Membership</td>
<td>83,800</td>
<td>315,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per 1,000 Population</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregational</td>
<td>64,500</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>78,100</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>69,400</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>4,900</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>7,400</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>411,000</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All religious groups</td>
<td>7,885,200</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* rounded to nearest 100
** rounded to nearest whole number

Source: Calculated from Finke and Stark 1992

Pluralism Misconceived

Oddly, the recognition that competition among religious groups was the dynamic behind the ever-rising levels of American religious participation withered away in the twentieth century as social scientists began to reassert the charges long leveled against pluralism by monopoly religions: that disputes among religious groups undercut the credibility of all, hence religion
is strongest where it enjoys an unchallenged monopoly. This view was formulated into elegant sociology by the prominent sociologist Peter Berger, who repeatedly argued that pluralism inevitably destroys the plausibility of all religions because only where a single faith prevails can there exist a “sacred canopy” that spreads a common outlook over an entire society, inspiring universal confidence and assent. As Berger explained, “the classical task of religion” is to construct “a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody.”

Thus, by ignoring the stunning evidence of American history, Berger and his many supporters concluded that religion was doomed by pluralism, and that to survive, therefore, modern societies would need to develop new, secular canopies. But Berger was quite wrong, as even he eventually admitted very gracefully. It seems to be the case that people don’t need all-embracing sacred canopies, but are sufficiently served by “sacred umbrellas,” to use Christian Smith’s wonderful image. Smith explained that people don’t need to agree with all their neighbors in order to sustain their religious convictions, they only need a set of like-minded friends; pluralism does not challenge the credibility of religions because groups can be entirely committed to their faith despite the presence of others committed to another. Thus, in a study of Catholic charismatics, Mary Jo Neitz found their full awareness of religious choices “did not undermine their own beliefs. Rather they felt they had ‘tested’ the belief system and been convinced of its superiority.” And in her study of secular Jewish women who converted to Orthodoxy, Lynn Davidman stressed how the “pluralization and multiplicity of choices available in the contemporary United States can actually strengthen Jewish communities.”

A national survey conducted in 1999 found that 40 percent of Americans have “shopped around” before selecting their present church, and these shoppers have a higher rate of attendance than do those who did not shop.