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Vol. 12 No. 3 Featured Article

In this article, we report the results of a study examining the relationship between a nation's religiosity and its "moral health." The received wisdom would lead one to predict a positive correlation between national religiosity and national moral health — as one goes up the other goes up. In fact, that appears not to be the case, and the example of the United States is most striking; Americans are among the most religious people in the Western world, and yet we have among the highest rates of homicide, abortion, and teen pregnancies. To the extent that these measures are related to something that might be called "national moral health," the intuitive thesis that links religiosity to morality would seem to be gainsaid. For details, read on ... and pass along these articles to your friends and colleagues and encourage them to subscribe to *Skeptic* and *eSkeptic*. —Michael Shermer, *Editor*

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Religious Belief & Societal Health

**New Study Reveals that Religion
Does Not Lead to a Healthier Society**

by Matthew Provonsha

It is commonly held that religion makes people more just, compassionate, and moral, but a new study suggests that the data belie that assumption. In fact, at first glance it would seem, religion has the opposite effect. The extensive study, “Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies,” published in the *Journal of Religion and Society* (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>) examines statistics from eighteen of the most developed democratic nations. It reveals clear correlations between various indicators of social strife and religiosity, showing that whether religion causes social strife or not, it certainly does not prevent it.

The author of the study, Gregory S. Paul, writes that it is a “first, brief look at an important subject that has been almost entirely neglected by social scientists...not an attempt to present a definitive study that establishes cause versus effect between religiosity, secularism and societal health.” However, the study does show a direct correlation between religiosity and dysfunctionality, which if nothing else, disproves the widespread belief that religiosity is beneficial, that secularism is detrimental, and that widespread acceptance of evolution is harmful.

Paul begins by explaining how far his findings diverge from common assumptions. He even quotes Benjamin Franklin and Dostoevsky to show how old these common-misconceptions are. Dostoevsky wrote, “if God does not exist, then everything is permissible.” Benjamin Franklin noted, “religion will be a powerful regulator of our actions, give us peace and tranquility within our minds, and render us benevolent, useful and beneficial to others.”

To this day, the belief that religiosity is socially beneficial is widespread in America, especially amongst politicians, as Paul notes: “The current [at that time] House majority leader T. DeLay contends that high crime rates and tragedies like the Columbine assault will continue as long as schools teach children ‘that they are nothing but glorified apes who have evolutionized [sic] out of some primordial soup of mud.’” But this view is not exclusively Republican, Paul explains, or even conservative: “presidential candidate Al Gore supported teaching both creationism and evolution, his running mate Joe Lieberman asserted that belief in a creator is instrumental to ‘secure the moral future of our nation, and raise the quality of life for all our people,’ and presidential candidate John Kerry emphasized his religious values in the latter part of his campaign.” Surveys show that many Americans agree “their church-going nation is an exceptional, God blessed, ‘shining city on the hill’ that stands as an impressive example for an increasingly skeptical world.” This assumption flies in the face of the actual statistical evidence that Paul examined.

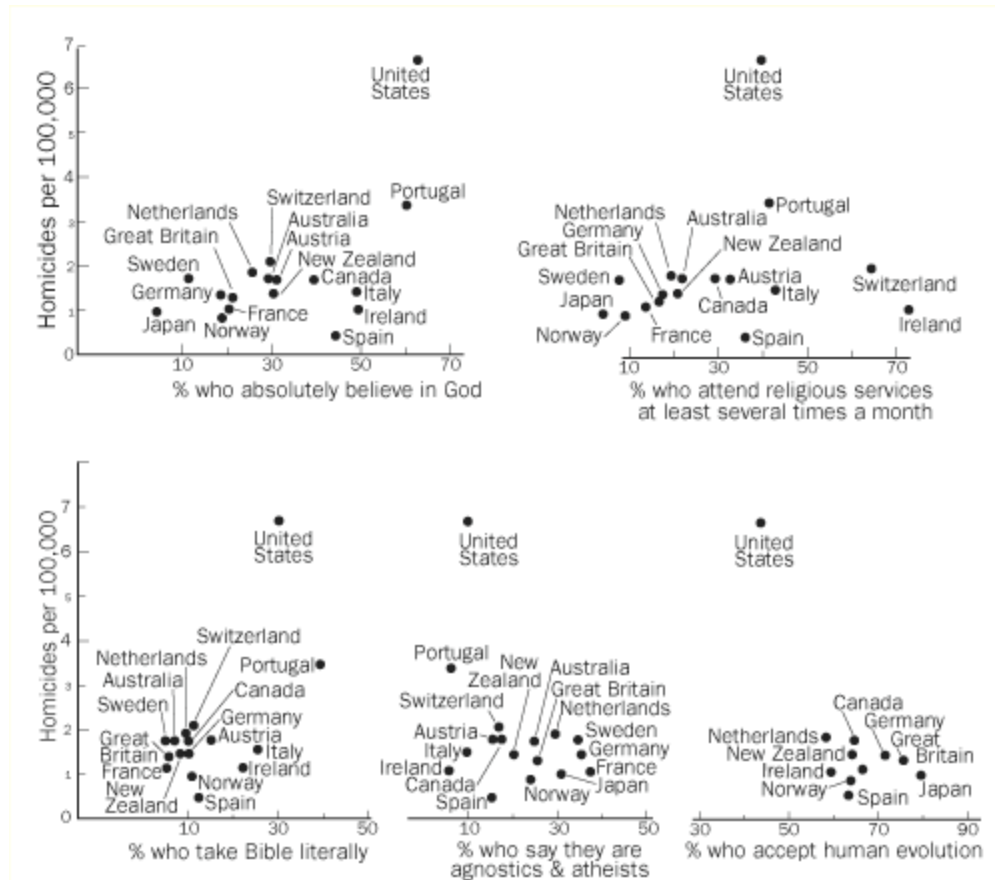
The study focuses on the prosperous democracies, because “levels of religious and nonreligious belief and practice, and indicators of societal health and dysfunction, have been most extensively and reliably surveyed” in them. Also, “The cultural and economic similarity of the developed democracies minimizes the variability of factors outside those being examined.” With a database of 800 million people, this study is far more reliable than results based on smaller sample sizes used in other such studies. The data are also current and extensive, collected in the middle and latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s from the International Social Survey Programme, the UN Development Programme, the World Health Organization, Gallup, and other well-documented sources.

For this study’s purpose, “dysfunctionality” is defined by such indicators of poor societal health as homicide, suicide, low life expectancy, STD infection, abortion, early pregnancy, and high childhood mortality (under five-years old). Religiosity is measured by biblical literalism, frequency of prayer and service attendance, as well as absolute belief in a creator in terms of ardency, conservatism, and activities.

Paul’s results are presented in nine charts. The first compares acceptance of evolution with various indicators of religiosity. From this Paul concludes that, “The absence of exceptions to the negative correlation between absolute belief in a creator and acceptance of evolution, plus the lack of a significant

religious revival in any developed democracy where evolution is popular, cast doubt on the thesis that societies can combine high rates of both religiosity and agreement with evolutionary science. Such an amalgamation may not be practical.” He adds: “When deciding between supernatural and natural causes is a matter of opinion large numbers are likely to opt for the latter,” and that, “Conversely, evolution will probably not enjoy strong majority support in the U.S. until religiosity declines markedly.”

All of the subsequent results that compare religiosity against dysfunctionality show a basic correlation between the two, though anomalies exist. Paul’s second figure (Figures 1 and 2 here) shows a positive correlation between religiosity and homicide rates.



Figures 1 & 2—There is a positive correlation between religiosity and homicide rate.
Redrawn from Gregory S. Paul’s Figure 2 (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>).

The United States is a strong exception, experiencing far higher rates of homicide than even (strongly theistic) Portugal, while Portugal itself is beset by much more homicide than the secular developed democracies. Hardly a “shining city on a hill” to the rest of the world, Paul writes that, “The most theistic prosperous democracy, the U.S., is exceptional, but not in the manner Franklin predicted. The United States is almost always the most dysfunctional of the developed democracies, sometimes spectacularly so, and almost always scores poorly.” This deviates immensely from what most Americans consider to be common wisdom: that religion is beneficial. “But in the other developed democracies religiosity continues to decline precipitously and avowed atheists often win high office, even as clergies warn about adverse societal consequences if a revival of creator belief does not occur.”

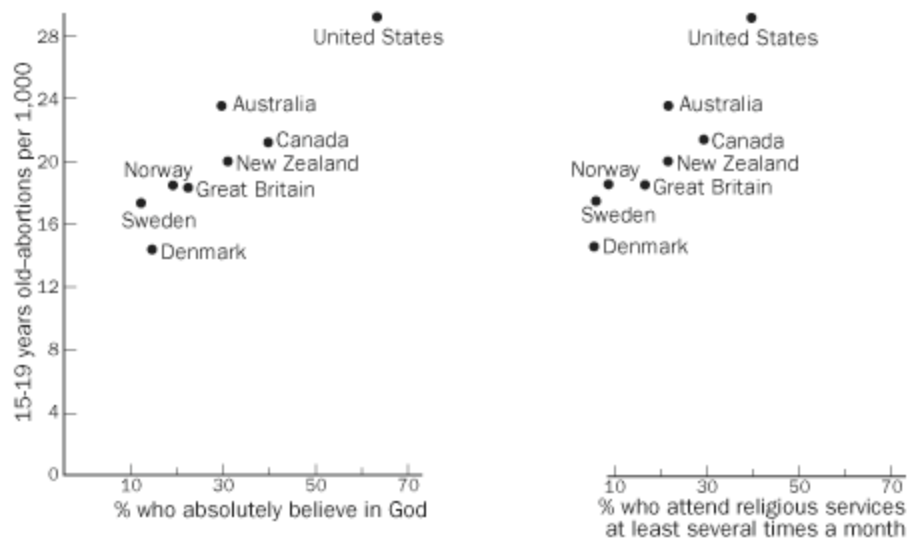
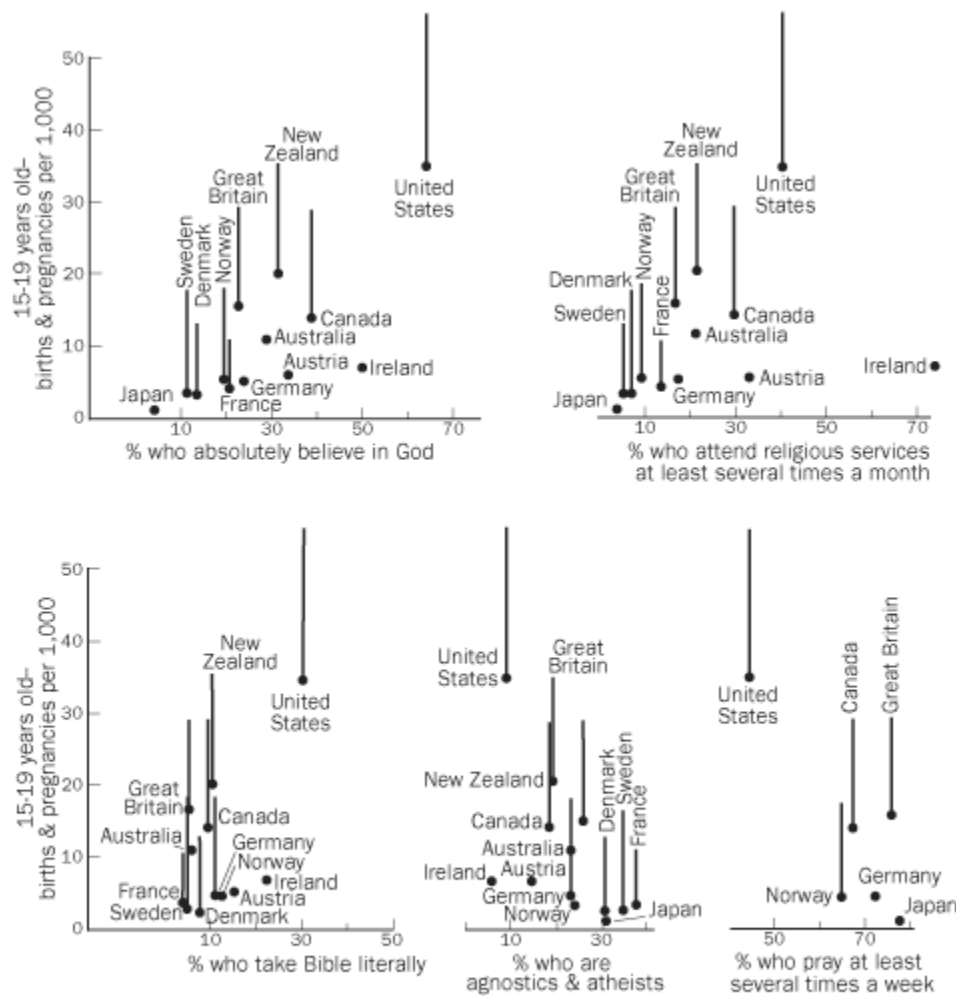


Figure 3—Religious societies tend to have higher rates of abortion than secular ones. This chart shows age 15–19 rates. (see also Figure 4, also on age 15–19 abortion rates.) Redrawn from Gregory S. Paul's Figure 8 (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>).



Figure 4—Religious societies tend to have higher rates of abortion than secular ones. Redrawn from G. S. Paul's Fig. 8 (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>).

Despite the best efforts of “pro-life” Americans, abortion rates are much higher in our Christian nation, and lowest in relatively secular ones such as Japan, France, and the Scandinavian countries (Figures 3 and 4). In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion in the prosperous democracies (Figures 5 and 6). This would seem to indicate that there is a positive correlation between religiosity and dysfunctionality, but what does that mean?



Figures 5 & 6—Secular societies generally have fewer teenage mothers than religious societies. Redrawn from G. S. Paul's Fig. 9 (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>).

The question is one of causation, and there is no clear answer. Whether religion leads directly to dysfunctionality, or religions merely flourish in dysfunctional societies, neither conclusion from this study flatters religion. The first tells us that religion is a hindrance to the development of moral character, and the second that religion hinders progress by distracting us from our troubles (with imaginary solutions to real problems). This study is complicated enough that I do not think that we can draw definitive negative conclusions about religion. But we can at least conclude, contrary to popular belief in this country, that it is not a given that religious societies are better, healthier, or more moral. What we can be clear about from this study is that highly religious societies can be dysfunctional, whereas by comparison secular societies in which evolution is largely accepted display real social cohesion and societal well-being. As is always the case in science, more data and additional research will help clarify our conclusions.

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