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Manuscripts

The editors welcome article submissions.
Send to TAE@aei.org or "Submissions" at our
Washington, D.C. mailing address.

Back Issues

Send \$7 per copy to The American Enterprise,
109 Briarcliffe Road, Dewitt, N.Y. 13214.

Subscriptions

New or Problems: (888) 295-9007. \$28 for one year.
(Available for U.S. and Canada delivery only.)

Postmaster: Send all subscription correspondence and address
changes to The American Enterprise, P.O. Box 6074, Duluth, MN
55806-6074. ISSN 1047-3572. Published eight times per year
(J/F, M, A/M, J, J/A, S, O/N, D) by the American Enterprise
Institute, 1150 17th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.
Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C. and additional
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Good Faith

By Karl Zinsmeister

The whole idea of religion as a behavior modification device rubs me the wrong way. Faith is not a coat you throw on to make yourself look and act better. Promoting belief because it might lower the crime rate or have some similar utilitarian benefit is an egregious misunderstanding of religion's actual importance, and an offense to real believers.

As the verses of an old spiritual put it:

Religion's like a blooming rose,
None can tell but them that knows.

If you feel the true presence of God in your life, everything else is colored by that. And if you find yourself separated from God, there is no faking a relationship.

Religious people worship not because they choose to but because they feel they *have* to—inklings of joy, awe, and gratitude well up in them in very personal ways. They feel drawn to God as by a gravitational pull (sometimes subtle, sometimes strong). And, yes, familiarity with God gives most people a more orderly, happy, and productive daily life. But far more significant are the deeper gifts God gives them: confidence about their place in the universe, an ability to weather misery and sinfulness and turn them into good, a much more delicate and soulful appreciation of existence than living on a simple physical plane allows.

For many God-fearing people, worship is the time when they feel most elevated, most removed from other creatures that lack spiritual discernment. Chimpanzees use tools. Dolphins play and gambol with each other. Every animal indulges in carnal life and communicates with fellow members of the species. Even the crudest organisms can breed and reproduce themselves. But only man is able to discern and embrace the universe's higher order. Only man worships and gives thanks to his Creator. Only man practices altruism, exercises compassion, offers praise, and suppresses his own selfish interests to honor the God who exists beyond our immediate surface life.

The companionship of God offers much in return: chances to learn and practice moral action. Experiences that elevate one's thinking. The power and peace that come from a Father's constant presence. An abstract yet powerfully immediate fraternity with millions of other humans from different places and times. Opportunities to be holy. These are the truest rewards of faith.

Yet Christians and Jews are also enjoined to be distinctive in the routines of their day-to-day lives. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells the first members of the church to live as "children of light" and pursue "goodness, righteousness, and truth." A whole series of very specific injunctions follow: "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need." Christians are told not to be angry or slanderous, to be kind, to avoid sexual

immorality, drunkenness, and greed. "Be very careful, then, how you live," instructs St. Paul—because the everyday actions of Christians are their advertisement to the rest of the world.

Theoretically, then, in addition to their richer philosophical understandings Christians ought to be registering unusually wholesome earthly outcomes. Does that happen in practice? The verdict of this issue of *The American Enterprise* is that, yes indeed, things generally go better with God. Societies are more prosperous and individuals more thriving where faith blooms. For a start, consider some of the social science I was able to pull together quickly on practical results:

Substance Abuse

- Research on 1,750 urban and rural high school students found that even after controlling for factors like parental control and support, students with no religious affiliation were vastly more likely to be underage drinkers. Among the non-religious, 98 percent of girls and 92 percent of boys were teen drinkers, and 19 percent of girls and 36 percent of boys were *heavy* drinkers (defined as four or more alcoholic drinks on two or more occasions each week). Among Protestants attending church at least five times per year, the comparable figures were 55 percent and 72 percent, and just 5 percent (boys and girls both) for heavy drinking.

- A study of 2,048 ninth graders in Ontario found that religious behavior was the strongest single discouragement to marijuana, tobacco, and alcohol use.

- A major Harvard study of inner-city youth found that those with a "strong religious orientation" were 54 percent less likely to use drugs.

- A report from the Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University reported that religious practice is one of the best predictors of whether a child will stay free of drugs.

- Not only does religion keep people away from drugs, it often brings back to sobriety those who stumble. Carl Jung, the pioneering psychiatrist, failed to cure any chronic alcoholics despite years of therapy and eventually concluded that the only escape for serious alcoholics is "a vital spiritual experience" resulting in "huge emotional displacement and rearrangement." Alcoholics have "a spiritual thirst for wholeness," he wrote, that cannot be satisfied by therapy, but only by a genuine religious commitment. Recent research has drawn similar conclusions on the importance of spiritual conversion as a path out of addiction.

Marriage and Family Life

Decades of academic work show that "in the strongest marriages and families, commitment to God burns bright" (as one research collator put it). A few examples:

There is evidence that religious belief can help individuals reach their very highest levels of potential.

- The very lowest risk of divorce today, numerous studies show, is among couples who attend religious services together. Only 7 percent of couples who attend church once a month or more will divorce within five years, according

to the U.S. government's National Survey of Family Growth. The rate is 2 1/2 times higher for couples who attend church just once a year or less.

- Across the U.S., the prevalence of divorce is 17 percent among weekly churchgoers, versus 37 percent among couples who claim "no religion."

- Men professing no religion commit adultery more often, and report having far more sex partners.

- Sexual satisfaction is higher among religious couples than others. A University of Kentucky study even found that religiously conservative couples tend to share household chores more fairly.

Pollster George Gallup summarizes that religious people show up in survey research as "a breed apart." In particular, "they tend to place greater importance on family life than do less spiritually committed persons."

Altruism

Another distinguishing characteristic of religious people, Gallup reports, is that they are "far more involved in charitable activities." His surveys show that 46 percent of the religiously active are involved in voluntary work with poor, elderly, or sick persons, versus just 22 percent of the non-religious. Gallup also finds that "highly spiritually committed" persons "tend to be more tolerant of persons of different races and religions," and that "they do not turn inward; rather, they are vitally concerned about the betterment of society."

- Statistics from the charitable clearinghouse Independent Sector show that among people who attend church weekly, 71 percent are volunteers of some sort, to the tune of 3.4 hours per week on average, and that they donate 3.8 percent of their income to others. The comparable figures for people who never attend church: 40 percent volunteer, giving an average of 1.6 hours per week, and 0.8 percent of their income goes to charity.

- A major study done for the Girl Scouts of America found that religious youngsters are much likelier than the non-religious to avoid anti-social acts and to engage in altruistic activities. Rich kids who are religious and poor kids who are religious "have far more in common with each other" than religious and non-religious kids in the same socioeconomic group do, according to the study authors.

Sexual Behavior

- A large multiple-regression analysis by Tom Smith of the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center

found that the most important influence by far on levels of sexual permissiveness among Americans is religiosity. Weekly church attendance sharply reduced incidences of premarital sex, extramarital adultery, and homosexuality, after controlling for other socioeconomic factors.

- Researchers at the Urban Institute and elsewhere have found that the single best indicator of delayed sexual activity and avoidance of pregnancy among inner-city teens is membership in a conservative Protestant church.

- Various studies show that religious teens are two to seven times as likely to avoid sexual intercourse as non-religious teens.

- Marriage rates of young men are higher, and unwed fatherhood is lower, among religious youth.

Crime and Delinquency

- Dozens of academic studies show that even after adjustments are made for family influence, neighborhood, race, income, and other factors, religious commitment (particularly church attendance) clearly discourages delinquency among youth.

- The National Survey of Families and Households tallied adolescent behavior problems like getting into trouble with the police, being suspended from school, running away from home, or developing emotional problems that require seeing a doctor. And researchers found that in every single family type—two-parent, one-parent, married, unmarried, step families, extended families, adopted families, etc.—parental church involvement is associated with significantly fewer behavior problems.

- A sampling of 46,000 sixth- through twelfth-graders showed that those who attend religious services at least once a month are only half as likely to engage in vandalism, substance abuse, drunk driving, and other problem behaviors.

- Extensive research by Harvard economist Richard Freeman and associates found that, all other factors being equal, inner-city residents who go to church are 59 percent less likely to commit crimes. (Teens are also far less likely to drop out of school, and adults more likely to hold a job, if they are worshippers.)

- Church attendance is a more accurate predictor of criminal behavior than whether an individual lived in public housing, grew up in a single-parent household, or had parents who received welfare.

- Churchgoing is the factor that most affects who escapes urban poverty, and is associated with “substantial differences in the behavior of youth.... [It] affects allocation of time, school attendance, work activity, and the frequency of socially deviant activity,” according to a book-length study by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

- Investigations show that the religious are less likely to cheat on their taxes.

*People who attend church weekly
volunteer twice as much, and give almost
five times as large a share of
their income to altruistic causes.*

- A survey of 24,000 magazine readers found that many admitted to serious lapses in ethical behavior—more than four out of ten had driven while intoxicated; 38 percent had cheated on their taxes; a third had deceived their best friend about something important within the

previous year. Investigators found two clear patterns in these results: Younger respondents were most likely to engage in illegal or unethical behavior. And the more religious people were, the less likely they were to commit these morally questionable acts.

- Inmates in prisons who make a religious commitment are less likely to return to jail after their release.

- Historical studies by Christie Davies, James Q. Wilson, and others note that society-wide crime decreases often correlate with religious renewals, and that crime increases often take place when religion is falling from favor.

Health

- Regular church attenders live longer. Religious belief markedly reduces the incidence of heart attack, arteriosclerosis, high blood pressure, and other cardiovascular maladies in particular, as documented in research extending back to a 1972 publication by investigators from the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health.

- A study of Canadian college students found that those involved with Christian campus groups were significantly healthier, made less use of health care services, and scored significantly higher on measures of psychological balance, ability to handle stress, and avoidance of depression—despite being similar to fellow students in other ways.

- Elderly patients who are religious are likelier to make successful recoveries from surgery, according to a Dartmouth Medical School study.

Happiness

- George Gallup reports that religious people show up in public opinion research as much happier with their lot in life than the non-religious. “A total of 68 percent of the highly spiritually committed say they are ‘very happy,’ compared to 30 percent of the highly uncommitted.”

- Overall satisfaction and marital contentment are higher, and depression rates are lower, among the religiously active.

- People who pray report a greater sense of well-being than people who do not pray, according to researchers from the University of Akron.

- Religious belief and practice can be important tools in rehabilitating refugees who have experienced torture, rape, starvation, and other inhumanity, according to San Francisco psychiatrists who worked with Cambodians who’d arrived in America with

mental and physical debilities from traumatic experiences.

- Individuals who don't attend church are four times likelier to commit suicide than those who attend regularly. Locales that have low rates of church membership are consistently higher in suicide rates. Indeed, rates of church attendance predict suicide rates more effectively than any other factor, including unemployment.

In addition to religion's prophylactic effects in fending off destructive influences, there is evidence that religious belief can help individuals reach their very highest levels of potential. Our lead feature story by Charles Murray grows out of his large, multi-year project researching the roots of high achievement. Murray is not a religious fellow, but he is an astute and honest investigator, and discovered that religious conviction turns out to be one of the crucial factors behind extraordinary human accomplishments across the ages.

Our second feature, also built on years of dogged academic investigation, is a fascinating tale on the rise of science. There is nothing "inevitable" about the growth of science. For most of human existence there was no methodical way of investigating and understanding the physical universe. The scientific outlook and scientific method were invented only one time, and in only one place. And professor Rodney Stark, like Charles Murray, was somewhat surprised to discover that the key to the blossoming of the scientific revolution was the rise of Christianity.

Forget the idea that science and religion are incompatible, Stark urges in his subversively fresh story. Open your mind to the reality that Judaism and Christianity in particular have unlocked human capabilities in a way that other religions can't match. Many historians have been puzzled that the Chinese, who enjoyed a technically advanced civilization for centuries, never developed science. Stark explains in his new book that this is a result of Chinese philosophy and religion, which lacked comprehension of a God who imposed rational laws on the universe, then created rational beings in his image, capable of comprehending those laws. Likewise, the ancient Greeks, for all their brilliance, had a petty and human-like conception of the Deity which made it impossible for them to imagine a conscious law-bound creation that could be decoded through careful observation.

Many of the greatest Western scientists—for example Alfred North Whitehead in his 1925 Lowell Lectures at Harvard—acknowledged that Christian theology was essential for the rise of science, and that non-Christian religious views stifled the scientific quest elsewhere. But this reality has been muffled and suppressed in recent generations. Professor Stark has now made a bold rediscovery.

Church attendance is a more accurate predictor of criminal behavior than whether an individual lived in public housing, grew up in a single-parent household, or had parents who received welfare.

The final article in our series on the effects of religion is also a kind of rediscovery. In the course of writing a book on the growth of cities, Joel Kotkin found that religion was not only the original reason for the rise of cities, but also a critical factor in keeping cities healthy and thriving after their founding. And he concluded that religion's importance to urban well-being continues right up to the current day, though few modern academics acknowledge it. "The good influence of godly citizens causes a city to prosper," as the Book of Proverbs puts it.

It's worth recalling Adam Smith's observation, early in the industrial revolution, that:

A man of low condition...as soon as he comes into a great city...is sunk in obscurity and darkness. His conduct is observed and attended to by nobody, and he is therefore likely to neglect it himself, and to abandon himself to every sort of low profligacy and vice.

But, Smith wrote, there is a proven antidote to the anti-social depravity encouraged by a city's anonymity. And that is "becoming the member of a small religious sect.... In little religious sects the morals of the common people have been almost always remarkably regular and orderly."

Sagacious political observers have argued that religion is important not only to keeping cities humane but to keeping self-governing democracy itself in balance. Alexis de Tocqueville warned that "despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion...is more needed in democratic republics than in any other. How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed?"

This was a deep concern of our nation's founders. "We have staked the whole of our political institutions on the capacity of mankind to govern themselves according to the Ten Commandments of God," stated James Madison. "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports," wrote George Washington. John Adams acknowledged that "Our Constitution was designed only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the governance of any other."

As they thought this matter through, Madison, Washington, and Adams had before them the warnings of contemporary Scottish historian Sir A. F. Tytler.

A democracy....can only exist until the voters discover they can vote themselves largesse from the public trea-

surey. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidate promising the most benefits...with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship.

The average age of the world's great civilizations has been 200 years. These nations have progressed through this sequence:

From bondage to spiritual faith;
 from spiritual faith to great courage;
 from courage to liberty, to abundance, to selfishness;
 from selfishness to complacency, to apathy, to dependency;
 from dependency back to bondage.

The influence of religion on social life is felt not only through individuals but also through organizations. Make a list of today's programs and institutions most effective at solving social problems and you will find a common thread linking many of them: They are faith-filled and God-centered.

Habitat for Humanity. Inner-city Catholic schools. The Salvation Army. Alcoholics Anonymous. True Love Waits. Prison Fellowship. Marriage Encounter. These are all built on religious wisdom, and they do absolutely critical work in keeping our civil society healthy. They represent our very strongest tools against the afflictions of modernity that threaten our nation most: drug abuse, homelessness, family decay, sexual decadence, narcissism, the welfare trap, the loss of moral compass.

Religious groups function as spiritual antibodies against cultural decline. That is not just a conservative nostrum, but a reality recognized by most honest observers. Here is how liberal social analyst Glenn Loury puts it:

One cannot imagine effectively teaching sexual abstinence, or the eschewal of violence, without an appeal to spiritual concepts. The most effective substance-abuse recovery programs are built around spiritual principles. The reports of successful efforts at reconstruction in ghetto communities invariably reveal a religious institution, or a set of devout believers, at the center of the effort.

I'll close by returning to the cautionary with which I opened this essay: Religious conviction is not just a social engineer's lever. Faith is something much deeper, more profound, and important than that, and it cannot be turned on and off to create convenient societal effects. Margaret Thatcher was exactly right when she warned in an interview a few years ago that "people who expect to benefit from the fruits of religious beliefs without the underlying belief itself will eventually be disap-

"We have staked the whole of our political institutions on the capacity of mankind to govern themselves according to the Ten Commandments of God,"
stated James Madison.

pointed. You might just as well cut off a really rather beautiful flower from its roots and expect it to continue to flower. It won't—it will die." Sincere belief, and the various disciplines that that entails, are the only route to religious rewards. There is no shortcut. There is no "light" version that

provides the same benefits at a lower price tag.

That said, the evidence assembled in this issue of *TAE* ought to be enormously heartening to most Americans. For right out there in our houses of worship, waiting to be applied, are powerful, time-tested systems capable of injecting meaning, success, and satisfaction into both our personal and social lives. In the face of the common impression that modern life grows colder, more atomized, and less salutary every year, this is an encouraging discovery.

And it's not just pie in the sky. We see signs in many important American sectors of a return to religious wisdom. Joel Kotkin describes hints of renewal even in our least hospitable urban communities. Rodney Stark reports that among certain critical groups, belief was never eclipsed in the first place in the way some reporters and academics would have us believe. We know for certain that in the massive middle of American society religious faith never lost its appeal or went much out of fashion. This is a bedrock upon which many good results can be built in the future.

In our last issue, Naomi Schaefer listed recent books that chronicle young Christians who bring their faith into professions like medicine and entertainment, and that outline ways in which religious perspectives are returning to fields such as journalism and social science. There is only one thing slowing this revival of religious insight. That is the resistance of entrenched, anti-religious elites.

A survey of a few years ago showed that 37 percent of white Americans with graduate degrees are "intensely antagonistic" toward Christians. Even more common than the open hostility of secular elites toward religion is their blind neglect. In the mid 1980s, a psychiatrist who had noticed many positive effects on mental and physical health from religious belief conducted a study of all the research articles published over a five-year period in the four major psychiatric journals. Only 3 percent considered religious factors in any way as an influence on the human condition, and only three studies, in total, focused tightly on religion.

There is no justification for ignoring faith in this way, much less for shunning it as a social force. God is a fundamental part of the lives of most Americans. Indeed the judgment of this issue of *TAE* is that there may be no influence more important to the peace, prosperity, imaginative success, and happiness of our future generations.

