

COMMENT

Reflections on Religious Belief and Prosociality:
Comment on Galen (2012)David G. Myers
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Luke Galen (2012) offers a timely analysis of associations between religiosity and prosocial and antisocial attitudes and behaviors. After identifying 10 points of agreement, I raise 8 questions for further reflection and research: (1) Is ingroup giving and volunteerism not prosocial? (2) Are religion-related prosocial norms part of the religious factor? (3) Is social support also appropriately considered part of the religious factor? (4) Are self-report data from more and less religious people invalid? (5) How should we disentangle gender and religiosity? (6) How might we resolve “the religious engagement paradox”? (7) Does religion serve an adaptive, evolutionary function? And (8) Might research further explore religiosity, in its varieties, and prosociality?

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Does religion do more harm than good? In public debate, religion’s adversaries point to yesterday’s inquisitions and witch hunts, and today’s gay-bashing, antiscience fundamentalists, while religion’s advocates remind us of the legacy of religion-inspired hospitals, hospices, orphanages, and universities. Christopher Hitchens (2007), in *God Is Not Great*, sought to explain, in the words of its subtitle, how religion poisons everything. Indeed, many who profess love practice hate. The “insane courage” that enabled the 9/11 terrorism, “came from religion,” noted Richard Dawkins (2001). But so did the nobler courage that motivated William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Mother Teresa, reply religion’s defenders, noting also the life-devaluing brutality of the irreligious Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and Kim Jong-il.

The vivid extremes of religion and irreligion—the best and the worst of each—rhetorically cancel each other. That leaves dispassionate research to assess whether religion more often promotes prosociality or antisociality among the estimated 68% of human beings (4.6 billion people) who answer “yes” when asked by Gallup “Is religion an important part of your everyday life?” (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). Given the prevalence of religion in its widely varying forms, and the significance of the question to contemporary social and political life, Galen’s (2012) review is timely.

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Points of Agreement

Galen’s (2012) assertions include these 10, each of which seems well documented by pertinent research:

1. Social perception. People in much-studied religious places such as the United States tend to view religious people favorably.

2. Ingroup bias. That’s likely because most people, being religious, display commonplace ingroup preferences. Ingroup bias operates within all sorts of groups, including religious groups.

3. Ingroup giving. Much giving and volunteering (in communities) and sharing (in laboratory games) is directed to ingroups.

4. Priming effects. Priming people with religious concepts increases sharing and honesty, but it can also increase negativity, including antigay prejudice.

5. Religious diversity. There are, as William James long ago recognized, varieties of religious experience, and the variations matter (Paloutzian & Park, in press). Intrinsic religiosity predicts prosociality; extrinsic religiosity does not. Fundamentalists differ radically from peace-and-justice-promoting Mennonites and liberation Catholics. “The social, historical, and moral realities of religions are just as complicated, scrambled, and difficult as every other social practice and institution in human life—both the ones we personally like and the ones we don’t,” wrote sociologist Christian Smith (2012, p. 14). “The truth about religions is complex and challenging. Historically and today, religion involves plenty of good and bad, light and darkness, splendor and evil to go around.”

6. Intentional versus spontaneous prosociality. Religiosity predicts planned more than spontaneous helping behaviors.

7. Private versus public charity. Religiosity also correlates more with private charity (giving money and time) than with support for public (government) charity.

8. Self-justification. Religion can justify outgroup prejudice. “The role of religion is paradoxical,” observed Gordon Allport (1958, p. 413). “It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice.” Thus religious prophets from Jeremiah to Desmond Tutu have often faulted their own community for failing to walk the compassion talk.

9. Curvilinear associations. Religiosity has some curvilinear relationships with prosociality and human flourishing. An example is the oft-reported curvilinear association between religiosity and racial prejudice, which Allport and Ross (1967) and others found lowest among the nonreligious and highly religious. More recently, an analysis of more than 676,000 Gallup–Healthways Well-Being Index interviews conducted in 2010 and 2011 found that “very religious” Americans had the highest levels of well-being (69.2%), with those “moderately religious” (63.7%) scoring lower than the “nonreligious” (65.3%; Newport, Witters, & Agrawal, 2012). Comparisons of prosocial highly religious people with less prosocial nominally religious people also fail to consider the existence of a growing third group—the relatively prosocial nonreligious. These include today’s religious “nones” and atheists (many of whom are highly educated).

10. Cultural variation. The religiosity–happiness association is stronger in relatively religious countries than in more secular countries—a finding recently reported by Diener et al. (2011) and also by Gebauer, Sedikides, and Neberich (2012).

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Questions to Ponder

Reading Galen (2012) stimulated these further thoughts and questions:

1. Is ingroup giving and volunteerism not prosocial? Along the continuum of human concern—from self to immediate kin to extended family to neighbors to larger communal groups (one’s religious community, school, village, state, nation, world)—where does prosociality begin? If someone gives to his or her alma mater (rather than taking a cruise), is that prosocial? To the local Rotary Club? To the American Red Cross if not the International Red Cross? Galen assumes that within a mostly religious town, support for “even a secular food bank or homeless shelter” (p. XXX) would reflect a mere “ingroup preference.” But isn’t much real charity local, in contexts where people are more aware of need (Musick & Wilson, 2008)?

Even so, the Center for Global Prosperity (2007, p. 22) reports that “religious people are more charitable than the non-religious not only in giving to their congregations, but are also—regardless of income, region, social class, and other demographic variables—significantly more charitable in their secular donations and informal giving.” A recent Pew Research Center survey of 2,303 adults found that 34% of “religiously active” were “active in charitable or volunteer organizations such as Habitat for Humanity or the Human Society (versus 15% for the non-religious)” (Jansen, 2011, para. 6, bullet 2). Putnam and Campbell’s (2010) own national survey data produced a similar result:

Religiously observant Americans are more generous with time and treasure than demographically similar secular Americans. This is true for secular causes (especially help to the needy, the elderly, and young people) as well as for purely religious causes. It is true even for most random acts of kindness. . . . And the pattern is so robust that evidence of it can be found in virtually every major national survey of Amer-

ican religious and social behavior. Any way you slice it, religious people are simply more generous. (pp. 453–454)

2. Are religion-related prosocial norms part of the religious factor? Highly religious people are said to overreport the prosocial behaviors commended by their religions. Religious primes are also said to elicit “a general social stereotype of prosociality” rather than something peculiarly religious (Galen, 2012, p. XXX). “Religion’s effect on self-control is based on cultural stereotypes about how religion ought to function” (Galen, 2012, p. XXX). And broad religious prosocial norms probably are impotent because “broad moral precepts result in little actual behavioral change” (Galen, 2012, p. XXX).

But consider: If, indeed, there are strong prosocial norms among religious people (many of whom hear almost weekly admonitions to “love your neighbor as yourself,” to support “the least of these,” and to practice the Golden Rule, to forgive, to embrace gratitude, and so forth), then—given what we know about the influence of values and attitudes on pertinent behaviors—might we not expect *some* effect of internalized values? Given the known influence of cultural norms, as in Cialdini’s (2012) work on activating moral norms regarding sustainable and antilittering behaviors, should we not also expect that religious prosocial norms would have *some* effect? And are these norms not part of the religious variable, and perhaps related to the association of religiosity with self-control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009)? The Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions (1993) articulated a cross-religion social responsibility norm in its consensus statement: “We must treat others as we wish others to treat us. . . . We consider humankind our family. . . . Every form of egoism should be rejected” (pp. 2 and 7).

Schwartz and Huismans (1995) explored such faith-rooted norms among Jews in Israel, Catholics in Spain, Calvinists in the Netherlands, the Orthodox in Greece, and Lutherans and Catholics in western Germany. In each place, they found highly religious people to be less hedonistic and self-oriented. Faith-rooted values appeared to give many people a reason to behave morally when no one is looking. “Religions encourage people to seek meaning beyond everyday existence,” they reported, and “exhort people to pursue causes greater than their personal desires. The opposed orientation, self-indulgent materialism, seeks happiness in the pursuit and consumption of material goods” (p. 91).

3. Is social support also appropriately considered part of the religious factor? Galen (2012, p. XXX) notes that “church attendance or social factors in religious organizations are typically stronger predictors” of prosociality than are private expressions of devotion and belief. But a full-bodied religion normally includes religious engagement, which is one indicator of degree or intensity of religiosity. *Religio* (“to bind together”) is not just nominal belief, it is spirituality practiced in community. As John Winthrop (1630/1965, p. 92) explained to fellow Puritans aboard the *Ara-bella* before landing in their new world, “We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together . . . as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.”

Social support (“fellowship”) is intrinsic to the religious life. Religious lip service without religious engagement is often an inactive religiosity. We could study the effects of religiosity while controlling for associated norms and social support, and for other

factors, such as sense of purpose in life, feelings of ultimate acceptance, and terror management. But are these not components of the religious factor? Would controlling for them therefore be like studying the effects of a hurricane while controlling for the wind, rain, and storm surge? Rather than consider religious “group attendance” a spurious variable, is it meaningful to ask, what are the associations of prosociality with religious engagement (entailing belief, ritual practice, and social connections)?

4. Are self-report data from more and less religious people invalid? We have many arenas in which self-reported attitudes and attributes predict behavior (Glasman & Albarracin, 2006). Self-reported prejudice modestly predicts discriminatory behavior (with implicit prejudice measures adding a bit more). Self-reported happiness predicts health. Self-reported voting (as in exit polls) predicts actual voting. So what should we make of the enormous and striking results from the Gallup World Poll suggesting greater generosity and volunteerism among the highly religious (see Figures 1 and 2)? Does it help that Gallup asked people to report on a specific prosocial behavior?

The greater rate of charitable donations among the highly religious occurred despite their having markedly lower incomes. Given that the average income (in dollars) of the less religious was about 75% greater than the income of the highly religious, the Gallup researchers (Pelham & Crabtree, 2008, “Bottom Line,” para. 3) concluded that “the data presented here offer compelling

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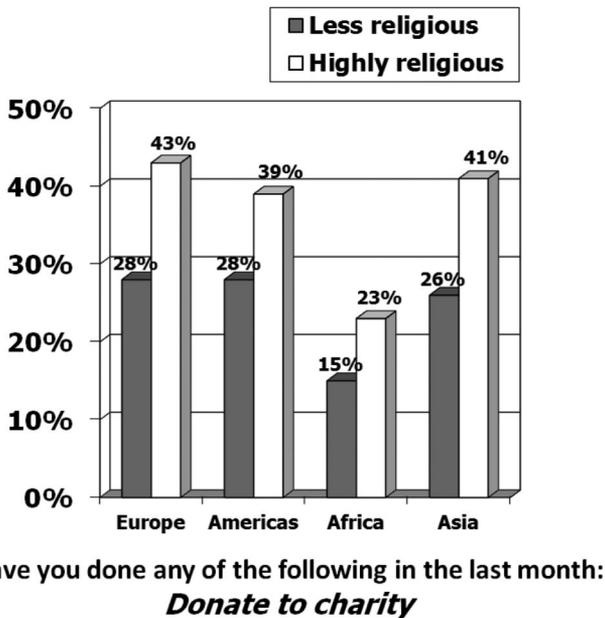


Figure 1. Self-reported religiosity and charitable donation rate in the Gallup World Poll (2,000-plus survey participants in 140 countries, 2006–2008). “Highly religious” people report that religion is important in their everyday life and having attended a religious service in the last week. “Less religious” are all others. Data from “Worldwide, Highly Religious More Likely to Help Others,” by B. Pelham and S. Crabtree, 2008 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/111013/worldwide-highly-religious-more-likely-help-others.aspx>). Copyright 2008 by Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved. The content is used with permission; however, Gallup retains all rights of republication.

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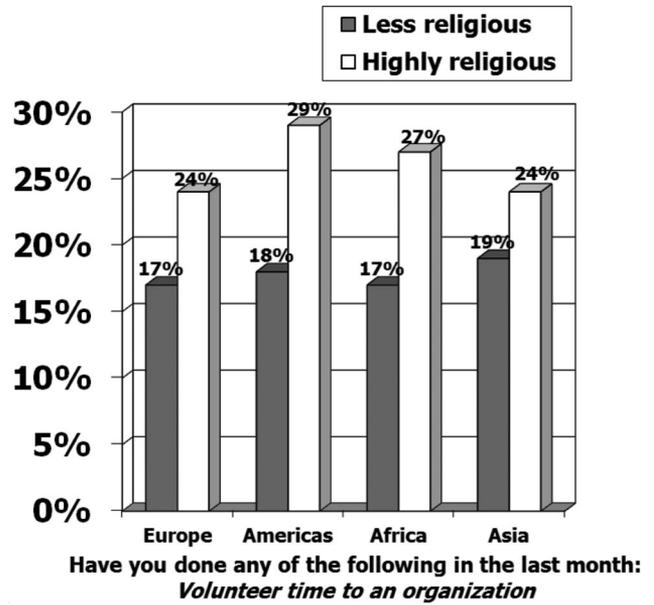


Figure 2. Self-reported religiosity and volunteerism in the Gallup World Poll. Data from “Worldwide, Highly Religious More Likely to Help Others,” by B. Pelham and S. Crabtree, 2008 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/111013/worldwide-highly-religious-more-likely-help-others.aspx>). Copyright 2008 by Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved. The content is used with permission; however, Gallup retains all rights of republication.

evidence of the role of religious dedication in helping to encourage supportive, community-oriented behaviors. . . .”

5. How should we disentangle gender and religiosity? Galen (2012) correctly notes that gender is confounded with religious engagement. For example, I have elsewhere reported (Myers, 2008) that women pray and worship more than men, and 80% of respondents to a Skeptics Society survey were male, as were 100% of skeptical heroes recently named by the *Skeptical Inquirer* and 97% of authors of skeptical Prometheus books. So, does the greater planned giving and volunteerism of religiously engaged people reflect their being more female? Or is women’s greater religiosity what disposes them to have more prosocial attitudes? Or both?

6. How might we resolve “the religious engagement paradox”? Curiously, irreligious places (nations, states) and highly religious individuals tend to exhibit high levels of health, well-being, and prosociality. Religious engagement correlates negatively with prosociality and well-being across aggregate levels (countries and American states), and positively across individuals (especially, as noted earlier, in more religious countries). To explore this curious and paradoxical phenomenon, I plotted the association of various state-level indices of human flourishing with state religious attendance rates—the percent reporting weekly or “almost every week” church, synagogue, or mosque attendance (from 706,888 interviews conducted during 2008 and 2009 for the Gallup–Healthways Well-Being Index; Newport, 2010). I also contrasted the resulting associations with those previously observed across individuals. For example (see <http://www.tinyurl.com/86dm5jt> for data figures and documentation):

Crime. Across states, religious engagement predicts higher crime rates. Yet across individuals, religious engagement predicts lower crime rates.

Emotional well-being. Across states, religious engagement predicts modestly lower emotional well-being. Yet across individuals, including Americans and Israeli Jews, religious engagement predicts greater self-reported adult happiness and adolescent well-being (Levin, 2011; Lim, 2012; Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012).

Longevity. Across states, religious engagement predicts shorter life expectancy. Yet across individuals, religious engagement predicts health (Deaton, 2009). In epidemiological studies, including a meta-analysis of 69 studies, religious individuals also live longer (Chida, Steptoe, & Powell, 2009; McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000).

Similar paradoxical findings appear in analyses of smoking (which is greater in more religious states but lower among more religious individuals) and teen pregnancy. (One notable exception to the religious engagement paradox is the lower suicide rates in both religious countries and among highly religious individuals; Pelham & Niyiri, 2008; Gearing & Lizardi, 2009.)

Religious places (countries and states) also tend to be lower income places. Thus to compare more with less religious countries and states is also to compare lower with higher income countries and states. Louis Tay (personal communication, November 23, 2011) reported that controlling for state-level income, education, and poverty eliminates or even slightly reverses the negative correlation between state-level religiosity and the various well-being measures.

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7. Does religion serve an adaptive, evolutionary function? Evolutionists such as David Sloan Wilson (*Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*) and their popularizers (Nicholas Wade, *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures*, and Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*) contend that religion is widespread because it served adaptive purposes in ancient societies. By moderating death-related anxiety and defensiveness, and fostering morality, social cohesion, and group survival, does religion express evolution's work?

8. Might research further explore religiosity, in its varieties, and prosociality? Consider:

Adoption and foster care. Who is most likely to adopt and provide foster care to children?

Disaster relief. Who volunteers time and resources following catastrophic disasters?

Mentoring. Who mentors ex-prisoners and at-risk children and supports refugee immigrants?

Estate planning. What is the charitable component (as opposed to money left to one's heirs) of the estate plans of more and less religious people? Does "religious discernment," as Paul Schervish (2010, p. 125) at Boston College's Center on Wealth and Philanthropy suggests, help guide "the use of vast material resources as a tool for deeper purposes?"

Vocational choices. Who, for example, seeks careers on Wall Street versus careers in lower paid human service professions?

Antisociality. What is the relationship between religiosity and antisociality, as reflected in crime and delinquency rates (B. R. Johnson, 2011)?

Sequential analyses. What do time series data reveal to be the prosociality aftermath of increasing religiosity, such as in the

German Panel national longitudinal data? Is religious conversion followed by increased pro- or antisociality? What about deconversion?

Conclusion

Research on religiosity and prosociality has yielded some agreed-upon conclusions and has raised questions that merit continuing research that explores different varieties of religious experience. Kudos to Luke Galen for contributing to the ongoing analysis and conversation.

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