"You Still Go to Church?"

America's Move Toward Secularism Has Societal Costs

America has always been a religious country. However, in recent years there has been a noticeable shift away from our Christian roots with a rapid growth of atheism and those who claim no religious affiliation, *particularly among the young*. For this reason, faith has sometimes become a forgotten factor in public policy.



Nevertheless, there is a growing amount of evidence that regular religious worship strengthens individuals, families, and the community around them.

Rodney Stark, a professor of sociology at the University of Washington has estimated that the positive benefits of religion in American society equate to $2.6 trillion per year, or about one-sixth of our total economic output.

The Charitable Benefit

Arthur Brooks, scholar and President of the *American Enterprise Institute* has noted that, people active and devout in their faith give more to charity. To choose an American example, 91 percent of religious conservatives give to charitable causes, compared to only 67 percent of those who identify themselves as secular liberals. Those who pray daily are 30 percent more likely to give to charity than people who never pray.

In Europe, too, churchgoers volunteer 30 percent more often, overall, than non-churchgoers. Even controlling for other factors, 83 percent of religious Americans will volunteer in any given year, while, among secular French people, only 27 percent volunteer.

Brooks notes that religious people aren't giving only to churches. They are far more likely to give food or money to the homeless, to donate blood, and even to return money from a cashier's mistake or to express empathy for the less fortunate. It's 15 percent more likely that church going Europeans will volunteer for non-religious charities than their secular counterparts. To the extent that weakened religious belief in America no longer inspires charity, governments will move to assume that role.[1] **In Church, Out of Jail**

The relationship between religious involvement and crime has been one of the most studied aspects of the social benefit of faith. With so much research, occasionally a few studies find no positive link between faith and lower criminal behavior. However, a systematic review of 40 studies that focus on the relationship between religion and delinquency, found that most of these studies reported an inverse relationship between measures of religiosity and delinquency. Among those studies with the most rigorous research design, religiosity's link with a decrease in delinquency was the strongest. Conversely,those studies reporting inconclusive results tended to be less methodologically rigorous.

A 2012 study examining recidivism outcomes among 732 offenders released from prison found that regular involvement in a Bible study between 2003 and 2009 significantly reduced the likelihood of

rearrest (26 percent), re-conviction (35 percent), and reincarceration (40 percent) of former prisoners. 2

Johnson also found a similar pattern among 54 studies examining drug use or abuse. Of those 54 studies, 50 found that increased religiosity was related to decreasing drug use or abuse. Among a review of 97 studies on alcohol abuse, 85 found that religiosity is associated with a lowered likelihood of alcohol abuse.

Church is Good For Your Marriage

David Larson of the *National Institute for Healthcare Research* found that regular church attendance is a critical factor in marital stability. An active religious life involving regular worship is a key component to marital stability. Harvard's School of Public Health recently found that regularly attending church services reduces a couple's risk of divorce by 47 percent.

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Is Church Healthy for Us?

A September 2018 study from Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* found that people who attended weekly religious services or practiced daily prayer or meditation in their youth reported greater life satisfaction and positivity in their 20s.

These results showed that people who attended religious services weekly in childhood and adolescence were approximately 18% more likely to report higher happiness as young adults (ages 23–30) than those who never attended services. They were also 29% more likely to volunteer in their communities and 33% less likely to use illicit drugs. They were 30% less likely to have started having sex at a young age, and thus 40% less likely to have a sexually transmitted infection compared to those who were not involved in religious services and spiritual practices.

Other researchers have found that weekly attendance at religious services is associated with 2 to 3 additional years of life These findings were controlled for other factors such as amount of physical exercise and taking cholesterol medications.

How good is this? Well, exercise will typically increase life expectancy by 3 to 5 years, and taking statin-type cholesterol-lowering drugs will typically increase life expectancy by 2.5 to 3.5 years.

A study using data from the Women's Health Initiative involving 95,000 people found that women aged 50 and up were 20% less likely to die in any given year if they attended religious services weekly compared to those that never attend religious services. 3

Could Church Make Life Worth Living?

Suicide is now the 10th leading cause of death among American adults and the second leading cause among youth and adolescents.

Even as the suicide rate rises, a growing body of research finds a positive relationship between faith and mental health. The help so many need may be as close as the local church.[4]

An inverse relationship has been found between religious involvement and suicidal behavior in 84 percent of 68 studies. That is, those with religious belief and practice are less likely to commit suicide. This association is also found for attempted suicide. Believers are less likely to overdose or to use other methods of self-harm.[5]

Footnotes:

1) How religious faith benefits society, Daniel Peterson, June 6, 2013, DeseretNews. Com 2) Religion, Crime, and Criminal Justice, July 2014, Oxford University Press, Byron R. Johnson and Curtis S. Schroeder. 3) Religion and Your Health, Religion Might Add Years to Your Life , By Mark Stibich, PhD , Feb 13, 2018 3) Dr. Andrew Simms, Is Faith Delusion? Why Religion is Good for Your Health" (Continuum, 2009) 4) Can We Reduce Suicides? Have Faith, June 15, 2018, Emilie Kao Director of the Richard and Helen DeVos Center. 5) Byron R. Johnson and Curtis S. Schroeder.