

## God and good behavior

GWYNNE DYER, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 21, 2007

They published an opinion poll in Britain recently in which 82 percent of the people polled said that they thought religion does more harm than good. My first reaction, I must admit, was to think: That's what they would say, isn't it? It's not just that suicide bombers give religion a bad name. In "post-Christian Britain," only 33 percent of the population identify themselves as "a religious person," and if you stripped out recent immigrants - Polish Catholics, West Indian Protestants, Pakistani Muslims, Indian Hindus - then the number would be even lower.

So that's what the British would say, isn't it?

In the United States, where over 85 percent of people describe themselves as religious believers, the answer would surely be very different, as it would be in Iran or Mexico. But then I remembered an article that was published a couple of years ago in the *Journal of Religion and Society* entitled (sorry about this) "Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies: A First Look," in which Gregory Paul set out to test the assertion that religion makes people behave better.

If that is true, then the United States should be heaven on earth, whereas Britain would be overrun with crime, sexual misbehavior and the like.

Paul examined the data from 18 developed countries, and found just the opposite: "In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, (venereal disease), teen pregnancy, and abortion," while "none of the strongly secularized, pro-evolution democracies is experiencing high levels of measurable dysfunction."

HOW INTERESTING. Now, to be fair, only one of the 18 countries examined (Japan) was not Christian or "post-Christian," so maybe this just shows that high levels of Christian belief correlate with a variety of social ills. There's really no way of testing that anyway, since apart from the countries of East Asia there really are no non-Christian countries where the level of religious belief has yet fallen below 60 or 70 percent.

There's not even any way of knowing if other religions will eventually experience the same decline in belief as the people who believed in them get richer, more urban and better educated. Even in what used to be Christendom, the United States didn't follow that path, after all. But the question is not whether religion will continue to flourish. It is whether that makes people behave better, and the data say no.

Even within the United States, Paul reported, "the strongly theistic, anti-evolution South and Midwest" have "markedly worse homicide, mortality, sexually transmitted disease, youth pregnancy, marital and related problems than the North-East, where societal conditions, secularization and acceptance of evolution approach European norms."

As the most religious country of the 18 surveyed, the United States also comes in with the highest rates for

teenage pregnancy and for gonorrhea and syphilis.

(A sidelight: boys who participate in sexual abstinence programs are more likely to get their partners pregnant, presumably because they are in denial about what they are doing.)

WHAT ARE we to make of this? I never thought that religion really made people behave any better, but apart from the occasional pogrom or religious war it hadn't occurred to me that it would actually make them behave worse. But there may be a clue in the fact that the more religious a country is, the smaller the resources that it puts into social spending, perhaps on the assumption that God will provide.

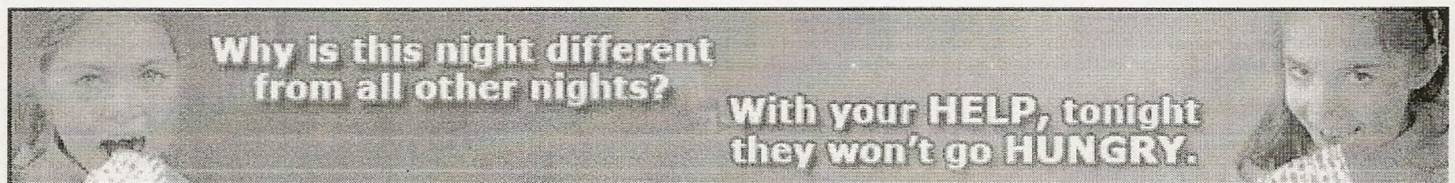
There is a very strong linkage between how secular a country is and how much it spends on social welfare and income redistribution. There is an equally strong correlation between high levels of social spending and a good score in Paul's survey - which makes sense, because all the ills he was measuring, from homicide to high infant mortality to teen pregnancy, are far more likely to affect the poor than the rich.

It's not that religious people choose to do bad things more often - indeed, they are probably more likely to get involved in charitable activities. Maybe it's just that when they talk about transforming people's lives, they don't think in terms of big state-run systems - and if you don't, lots of people fall through the cracks.

Whereas the Godless, all alone under the empty sky, decide that they must band together and help one another through large amounts of social spending, because Nobody else is going to do it for them.

Or maybe there is some other reason entirely, but the numbers don't lie: the more religious a country is, the worse people behave in their private lives. Thank God they didn't do a survey on the correlation between strong religious belief and war.

*The writer is a London-based independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.*



This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1173879142077&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

[ [Back to the Article](#) ]

Copyright 1995-2007 The Jerusalem Post - <http://www.jpost.com/>