

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Complicated Relationship Between Religiosity and Social Well-Being

To the Editor:

Phil Zuckerman is right that secularized nations tend to have happier and healthier people than do highly religious nations ("[The Virtues of Godlessness](#)," *The Chronicle Review*, January 30). In writing *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on Why God Is Good and Faith Isn't Evil*, the most challenging evidence I encountered was the reality that Zuckerman describes. Countries with the highest rates of happiness, life expectancy, literacy, income, gender equality, and education, and with the lowest rates of infant mortality, homicide, AIDS, and teen pregnancy, are relatively secular. [If you relocate to another country, and wish for a civil, safe, healthy place, you should consider relatively irreligious Norway, Sweden, Australia, Canada, or the Netherlands.

Such analyses of secularity and civility have been faulted for cherry-picking both their social health measures (for example, excluding suicide) and their countries (omitting North Korea, China, Vietnam, and the former Soviet states). Instead, they focus on secular countries whose values were fed by a Judeo-Christian heritage.

Still,]* Zuckerman's point can be extended to U.S. state-by-state comparisons. The Southern states all have higher religious-adherence rates than the West Coast states. They also have slightly higher divorce rates and much higher crime and smoking rates. So once again, it looks like the least religious places are the healthiest and most flourishing.

But it's *individuals* who experience more or less faith, happiness, and health. And, surprise, the correlations across individuals run the other direction. Among 45,859 American adults responding since 1972 to National Opinion Research Center surveys, the percentage of "very happy" people ranged from 28 percent of those who never attended religious services up to 48 percent of those who attended more than once a week.

Likewise, compared with never-attenders, the most religiously engaged Americans were half as likely to be divorced and about one-fourth as likely to be smokers or have been arrested.

Simple correlations leave other factors uncontrolled. But these associations do appear within subgroups, as in the correlation of irreligiosity and arrest rates among those with lots of education and those with little.

Moreover, new data that compare more than 90,000 Europeans in dozens of discrete European regions (of which there are, for instance, a dozen in Britain) offer a striking result. In the words of Andrew Clark (Paris School of Economics) and Orsolya Lelkes, "People are more satisfied in more religious regions."

New Gallup data from surveys of over 2,000 people in each of more than 140 nations worldwide suggest that faith also appears to foster generosity of money and time. Worldwide, highly religious people (who attended a service in the last week and say that religion is important) are about 50 percent more likely than others to have donated money to a charity in the last month (despite having lower incomes) and to have volunteered.

Zuckerman rightly notes a "great socio-religious irony" that "traditionally religious values are most [practiced] in the most irreligious nations." To this we can add another irony for future scholarship to explore: that, nevertheless, within nations, those values are most practiced by the most religious individuals. The virtues of Godliness?

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*This submitted section was omitted from published version.