

The Chronicle Review

CONSIDER THIS

The Virtues of Godlessness

The least religious nations are also the most healthy and successful

By PHIL ZUCKERMAN

The world seems more religious than ever these days.

Across the Middle East, fervent forms of Islam are growing more popular and more politically active. Muslim nations that were somewhat secularized 40 years ago — like Lebanon and Iran — are now teeming with fundamentalism. In Turkey and Egypt, increasing numbers of women are turning to the veil as an overt manifestation of reinvigorated religious commitment. But it isn't just in the Muslim world that religion is thriving. From Brazil to El Salvador, Protestant evangelicalism is spreading with great success, instilling a spirited, holy zeal throughout Latin America. Pentecostalism is proliferating, too — vigorously — and not only throughout Latin America, but in Africa and even, to a lesser extent, China. And many nations of the former Soviet Union, which had atheism imposed upon them for decades, have emerged from the communist era with their faith not only intact, but strong and vibrant. Here in the United States, religion is definitely alive and well. In terms of church attendance and belief in God, Jesus, and the Bible, religion in the United States is stronger and more robust than in most other developed democracies.

In sum, from Nebraska to Nepal, from Georgia to Guatemala, and from Utah to Uganda, humans all over the globe are vigorously praising various deities; regularly attending services at churches, temples, and mosques; persistently studying sacred texts; dutifully performing holy rites; energetically carrying out spiritual rituals; soberly defending the world from sin; piously fasting; and enthusiastically praying and then praying some more, singing, praising, and loving this or that savior, prophet, or God.

But that is not occurring everywhere. I am referring to two nations in particular, Denmark and Sweden, which are probably the least religious countries in the world, and possibly in the history of the world. Amidst all this vibrant global piety — atop the vast swelling sea of sacredness — Denmark and Sweden float along like small, content, durable dinghies of secular life, where most people are nonreligious and don't worship Jesus or Vishnu, don't revere sacred texts, don't pray, and don't give much credence to the essential dogmas of the world's great faiths.

In clean and green Scandinavia, few people speak of God, few people spend much time thinking about theological matters, and although their media in recent years has done an unusually large amount of reporting on religion, even that is offered as an attempt to grapple with and make sense of a strange foreign phenomenon out there in the wider

world that refuses to disappear, a phenomenon that takes on such dire significance for everyone — except, well, for Danes and Swedes.

What are societies like when faith in God is minimal, church attendance is drastically low, and religion is a distinctly muted and marginal aspect of everyday life?

Many people assume that religion is what keeps people moral, that a society without God would be hell on earth: rampant with immorality, full of evil, and teeming with depravity. But that doesn't seem to be the case for Scandinavians in those two countries. Although they may have relatively high rates of petty crime and burglary, and although these crime rates have been on the rise in recent decades, their overall rates of violent crime — including murder, aggravated assault, and rape — are among the lowest on earth. Yet the majority of Danes and Swedes do not believe that God is "up there," keeping diligent tabs on their behavior, slating the good for heaven and the wicked for hell. Most Danes and Swedes don't believe that sin permeates the world, and that only Jesus, the Son of God, who died for their sins, can serve as a remedy. In fact, most Danes and Swedes don't even believe in the notion of "sin."

So the typical Dane or Swede doesn't believe all that much in God. And simultaneously, they don't commit much murder. But aren't they a dour, depressed lot, all the same? Not according to Ruut Veenhoven, professor emeritus of social conditions for human happiness at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Veenhoven is a leading authority on worldwide levels of happiness from country to country. He recently ranked 91 nations on an international happiness scale, basing his research on cumulative scores from numerous worldwide surveys. According to his calculations, the country that leads the globe — ranking No. 1 in terms of its residents' overall level of happiness — is little, peaceful, and relatively godless Denmark.

The connection between religion — or the lack thereof — and societal health is admittedly complex. It is difficult to definitively establish that secularism is always good for society and religion always bad. However, the often posited opposite claim is equally difficult to substantiate: that secularism is always bad for a society and religion always good. To be sure, in some instances, religion can be a strong and positive ingredient in establishing societal health, prosperity, and well-being. And when considering what factors contribute to the making of a good society, religion can be a positive force.

Here in the United States, for example, religious ideals often serve as a beneficial counterbalance against the cutthroat brand of individualism that can be so rampant and dominating. Religious congregations in America serve as community centers, counseling providers, and day-care sites. And a significant amount of research has shown that moderately religious Americans report greater subjective well-being and life satisfaction, greater marital satisfaction, better family cohesion, and fewer symptoms of depression than the nonreligious. Historically, a proliferation of religious devotion, faith in God, and reliance on the Bible has sometimes been a determining factor in establishing schools for children, creating universities, building hospitals for the sick and homes for the homeless, taking care of orphans and the elderly, resisting oppression, establishing law and order, and developing democracy.

In other instances, however, religion may not have such positive societal effects. It can often be one of the main sources of tension, violence, poverty, oppression, inequality, and

disorder in a given society. A quick perusal of the state of the world will reveal that widespread faith in God or strong religious sentiment in a given country does not necessarily ensure societal health. After all, many of the most religious and faithful nations on earth are simultaneously among the most dangerous and destitute. Conversely, a widespread lack of faith in God or very low levels of religiosity in a given country does not necessarily spell societal ruin. The fact is, the majority of the most irreligious democracies are among the most prosperous and successful nations on earth.

Just to be perfectly clear here: I am not arguing that the admirably high level of societal health in Scandinavia is directly caused by the low levels of religiosity. Although one could certainly make such a case — arguing that a minimal focus on God and the afterlife, and a stronger focus on solving problems of daily life in a rational, secular manner have led to positive, successful societal outcomes in Scandinavia — that is not the argument I wish to develop here. Rather, I simply wish to soberly counter the widely touted assertion that without religion, society is doomed.

If you can smell my ax starting to grind here, your nostrils are in good working order. The claim that without religion, society is doomed deserves to be challenged because, aside from being poor social science, it is a highly political claim that is regularly promulgated by some of America's most popular and most influential Christian conservatives. Those individuals do not represent or speak for the majority of believers in America, but together they do constitute a formidable and uniquely zealous chorus that reaches the hearts and minds of millions of people on a regular basis.

I am referring, for instance, to Pat Robertson, the successful televangelist and founder of the Christian Coalition, who regularly condemns secularism. And Ann Coulter, the Christian conservative media pundit, who has written in one of her best-selling books that societies that fail to grasp God's significance are headed toward slavery, genocide, and bestiality, and that when Darwinian/evolutionary theory is widely accepted in a given society, all morality is abandoned. Conservative pundit William J. Bennett has argued that "the only reliable answer" for combating societal ills is widespread religious faith, and that without religion, a society is without "the best and most reliable means to reinforce the good" in social life and human relations.

Conservative Christian Americans aren't the only ones who broadcast this perspective. Keith Ward, a professor of theology at the University of Oxford, has recently argued that societies that lack strong religious beliefs are essentially immoral, unfree, and irrational. He claims that any nonreligious society without a strong belief in God is a society "beyond morality ... and freedom" and ultimately predicated upon "the denial of human dignity." John D. Caputo, a professor of religion and humanities at Syracuse University, has declared that people who are without religion and who do not love God are nothing more than selfish louts, thereby implying that a society with a preponderance of irreligious people would be a fairly loveless, miserable place.

Belief in God may certainly give emotional and psychological comfort to the individual believer — especially in times of pain, sadness, or uncertainty — and history has clearly shown that religious involvement and faith in God can often motivate individuals or cultures to promote justice and healthy societal development. But the fact still remains that it is not the most religious nations in our world today, but rather the most secular,

that have been able to create the most civil, just, safe, equitable, humane, and prosperous societies. Denmark and Sweden stand out as shining examples. The German think tank the Hans-Böckler Stiftung recently ranked nations in terms of their success at establishing social justice within their societies; Denmark and Sweden, two of the least-religious nations in the world, tied for first.

It is a great socioreligious irony — for lack of a better term — that when we consider the fundamental values and moral imperatives contained within the world's great religions, such as caring for the sick, the infirm, the elderly, the poor, the orphaned, the vulnerable; practicing mercy, charity, and goodwill toward one's fellow human beings; and fostering generosity, humility, honesty, and communal concern over individual egotism — those traditionally religious values are most successfully established, institutionalized, and put into practice at the societal level in the most irreligious nations in the world today.

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