Does Being Religious Make You More Generous?

Yes... no... well, it’s complicated

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For years, many have been preaching that religion is good for you, both for individuals and society as a whole. And this is not just advice from your mother, priest, or rabbi. Social scientists have argued this point too, particularly those interested in studying generosity. In Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s magnum opus, American Grace, they note:

In particular, religiously observant Americans are more generous with time and treasure than demographically similar secular Americans. . . The pattern is so robust that evidence of it can be found in virtually every major national survey of American religious and social behavior. Any way you slice it, religious people are simply more generous.1

Religious Americans are more apt to give financially, volunteer, generate social capital, and foster civic responsibility. But what if all these studies have overstated the case? What if religion does not positively correlate to generosity?2

That is exactly what Jean Decety, a University of Chicago neuroscientist, and his colleagues seek to argue in a recent article in the journal Current Biology. In fact, Decety not only seeks to overturn the positive correlation between religion and altruism, but he seeks to demonstrate that religion actually leads to higher levels of selfishness.

Decety’s article is unusual not only for his study’s conclusions, but also for the publicity the study has received. I am assured by my scientific colleagues that most Current Biology articles are not picked up by Forbes and the Economist and bandied about in the twittersphere. Thus the findings as well as the amount of coverage it has received makes it worth the attention of those interested in faith and giving.

For the study, Docety recruited 1,170 families from six countries. While a number of religions were represented, Christians, Muslims, and the non-religious were the statistically relevant groups. Within each family, Docety asked a single child (between the ages of 5 to 12) to play the dictator game. (It sounds worse than it really is – psychologists often use a version of the game to measure altruism). Each child received 30 stickers. They were asked to select their 10 favorite to keep. Then the experimenter told the child that some children were not able to play the game and they could share as many of their 10 stickers as they would like to an unnamed classmate. Altruism was measured as the number of stickers shared. At the same time, the kids were shown videos of people hurting others and asked how mean these bullies were and how much punishment they deserved. Finally Docety asked the kids’ parents not only about their religious beliefs and practices, but also how moral they thought their kids were.
And the results were clear: Non-religious children were more generous. Religious kids were less altruistic and more apt to deal out punishment even as their parents felt they held a higher sense of empathy and morality.

Of course, this is just one study among many, and the results would need to be replicated before we could draw strong conclusions. But the results are striking. Does this overturn much of what we have thought about the tie between religiosity and pro-social behavior? My answer: it’s complicated.

If religion once received a pass from critique, that is no longer true. The daily news demonstrates the evil perpetrated by extremists in the name of religion. Yet, at the same time these acts cannot undercut the immense good done in the world in the name of religion.

I believe Decety’s own comments have overplayed the findings of his study. He has remarked, “Secularity—like having your own laws and rules based on rational thinking, reason rather than holy books—is better for everybody.” Few would want to deny that secular persons can be highly moral, but I do believe declaring secularity as superior for everyone is a stretch. Decety goes on to predict his scientific research would be panned by religious persons as another feud between religion and science; evil scientists versus evangelical Christians. Such overstatements are unhelpful and cause readers to miss the actual weight of his study in their haste to take arms in an unwinnable culture war.

Decety’s findings are worth taking seriously, but I am more interested in exploring some key concepts that frame his study. First, I am intrigued by his notion of altruism and giving. For me, whether sharing stickers serves as an acceptable equivalent for altruism is less the point. If you are working with adolescents, you have to use something, and this is a fairly accepted study design. But how do we understand the motivations for giving? Sharing stickers isn’t meeting another’s basic needs. Is it simply sharing something of value with another? Maybe, we are asking more than Decety cares to answer, but I want to know something about why kids might give away their stickers. Is it from their values or motivations? Could they have been primed in different ways to give? If religious traditions advocate helping others both inside and outside their community, would the results change if they were able to see or hear those without stickers? Would that then cease to measure altruism?

Going deeper to understand generosity is one question, but the larger one for me is the question of religiosity. We know that religiosity is much more than a label, and while Decety asked the parents of the children studied to reflect on their religious practices, this didn’t inform the study’s conclusions. Simply labeling kids as Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, or non-religious seems to overlook the complexities of religious identity. Even in the West where religion is often conceived as a choice, it is rarely that simple. Religion is tied to one’s culture, family, beliefs, practices, and experiences. Rarely if ever is religion a one-time choice or a solitary experience. It is most often experienced in some form of community.
At the same time, people are complex. Religion is not the only factor linked to altruism. The researchers control for gender, age, country of origin, and income, but there are countless other potential contributing factors to explain with whom children may or may not share their stickers. The study shows little if no causal link between faith and giving besides a family label of religiosity. What if kids were primed with religious language, imagery, or rituals from their tradition before being asked if they would like to share? There would be ways to design experiments to show more direct links if that was the chief hypothesis the researchers sought to test.

Despite these caveats, the study is worthy of our reflection. It challenges our assumptions that religiosity is naturally good for us and society, but it also compels us to explore more deeply what we mean by generosity and religiosity.

Both questions are worth further exploration. Without discounting his findings, I may disagree with the more sweeping conclusions Decety draws. However, he and I can agree on at least one thing: children learn religious values and beliefs from their family and community, and their upbringing shapes their morality. Attending to embodied traditions and practices of communities is an essential context through which to explore faith and giving.

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