

Myth 5: Atheist Aid

A Theologian Answers the Atheists

by Father Thomas Williams, LC

Atheists often claim to be "just as moral" as religious believers. Christopher Hitchens, for instance, in *God Is Not Great*, offers his rather vague and subjective assertion that no statistic will ever find that atheists "commit more crimes of greed or violence than the faithful." Yet, when comparing the morals of believers and nonbelievers, neo-atheist authors are careful to tiptoe around the issue of charitable activity. The reason that atheists studiously avoid the question of generosity is that study after study shows an overwhelming difference between believers and non-believers. Not surprisingly, the believers come out on top every time.

In the year 2000, researchers at U.S. universities and the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut undertook the massive Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, drawing 30,000 observations from 50 communities across the United States. The survey questioned individuals about their "civic behavior," including their giving and volunteering during the year preceding the survey. Analyzing the data, professor Arthur Brooks of Syracuse University divided respondents into three groups. He referred to the respondents who reported attending religious services every week or more often as "religious." This group made up 33% of the sample. Brooks called those who reported attending religious services less than a few times per year or explicitly saying they have no religion as "secular." These people made up 26% of the sample, leaving those who practice their religion occasionally to make up the remaining 41% of the sample.

Brooks found the variance between "religious" and "secular" giving to be dramatic. Religious people are 25 percentage points more likely than secularists to donate money (91% to 66%) and 23 points more likely to volunteer time (67% to 44%). In real dollars, this translates into an average annual giving of \$2,210 among the religious as compared to \$642 among the secular. Regarding hours volunteered, religious people were found to volunteer an average of 12 times per year, while secular people volunteer an average of 5.8 times. To put this into perspective, religious people are 33% of the population, but they make 52% of donations and 45% of times volunteered. Secular people make up 26% of the population, but they contribute 13% of the dollars and 17% of the times volunteered.

Interestingly, these data show that the determining factor in predicting charitable behavior is not so much one's particular religion, but rather the seriousness of one's religious commitment. For example, among those who attend worship services regularly, 92% of Protestants give charitably, compared to 91% of Catholics, 91% of Jews and 89% from other religions. Another indicative finding of the study relates to giving to nonreligious charities. It turns out that religious people are more generous than secular people with nonreligious causes as well as with religious ones. While 68% of the total population gives (and 51% volunteers) to nonreligious causes each year, religious people are 10 points more likely to give to these causes than secularists (71% to 61%) and 21 points more likely to volunteer (60% to 39%). As examples, religious people are 7 points more likely than secularists to volunteer for neighborhood and civic groups, 20 points more likely to volunteer to help the poor or elderly, and 26 points more likely to volunteer for school or youth programs. Across the board, religious practice is directly correlated to generosity with both time and money.

These results are only surprising to someone with an ingrained anti-religious prejudice. Even the deist Voltaire — no friend to Christianity — felt obliged to admit the great benefit of religion to organized charity: "Perhaps there is nothing greater on earth than the sacrifices of youth and beauty, often of high birth, made by the gentle sex in order to work in hospitals for the relief of human misery, the sight of which is so revolting to our delicacy. Peoples separated from the Roman religion have imitated but imperfectly so generous a charity."

In his analysis of charitable giving and faith, Brooks ends with a look at religion's pedagogical influence over giving and volunteering. "Houses of worship might teach their congregants the religious duty to give and about both the physical and spiritual needs of the poor. Simply put, people may be more likely to learn charity inside a church, synagogue or mosque than outside. If charity is indeed a learned behavior, it may be that houses of worship are only one means [albeit an especially efficacious one] to teach it."

Neo-atheist tracts such as *God Is Not Great* rely almost exclusively on anecdotal evidence to make their case against religion. In asserting the superiority of atheism over religious belief, they simply string together vignettes showing horrible things done in the name of religion, in the hope that their stories will disgust readers enough to turn them away from religion. Yet, wherever a real comparison can be made between religious people and unbelievers, the statistical evidence always favors believers. Whether we speak about the evils and bloodshed of atheist regimes, the generosity and charitable giving of religious people, or simply the happiness derived from religious faith, religion beats atheism hands down in every area. This fact alone will give pause to any unbiased observer.

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