



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on September 22, 2014

Published in the September 22, 2014 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 30, No. 18

Religion: Crutch for the Crazy or Panacea for Peon and Prince?

“Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers,” said then-Minnesota governor and ex-professional wrestler Jesse Ventura in 1999. It’s a common idea. Atheism’s point man Richard Dawkins has called even disorganized religion a crutch, author Robert Heinlein expressed this secular tenet through one of his characters, and heavy metal band Iced Earth screamed the thought in a song. In fact, the notion is expressed so much, it could occur to one that the idea religion is a crutch is a crutch.



Now, you could think the world’s Dawkinses should be taken just as seriously as the late Robin Williams was when, expressing a sentiment Iced Earth might agree with, he quipped, “Reality is just a crutch for people who can’t cope with drugs.” But since the issue here is no laughing matter, let us start with a very serious acknowledgment about religion being a crutch: It certainly can be.

Not true, however, is what the religion-as-crutch theory invariably implies and is commonly taken to mean: Since faith’s supposed crutch status would indicate it is embraced out of convenience, religion must be false and destructive and God must not exist. Playwright Tom Stoppard could be correct in saying, “Atheism is a crutch for those who cannot bear the reality of God,” but I doubt this would make unbelievers question the reality of atheism. A young child may instinctively use his father as a crutch — deriving a feeling of security and stability from him — but that is not why he believes his father exists; it just gives him another good reason to be happy his father does. Nothing is a truer crutch than an actual crutch, and it not only exists but is the most necessary thing when needed temporarily to buttress a broken bone. And the same can be said of faith, that it is needed for a broken race and is required only temporarily, during that transitional phase between birth and death.

The point is this: That something is sometimes used as a crutch, or even is always thus employed, tells us nothing about its reality or value. There are good crutches and bad crutches, and good crutches used gratuitously. As for those used and grown and sown to the point of destructiveness, the irreligious crutch-kvetchers never point out that government can be a crutch. And what of faith? Responding to Ventura’s earlier quoted attack on religion, Carlsbad First Church of the Nazarene pastor Rev. Dean Coonradt was quoted in the October 17, 1999 edition of the *Los Angeles Times* as saying, “If a crutch represents something helpful[,] then religion is a crutch. We admit we need help to get to heaven. We need God’s help, God’s saving grace. We also need the help and encouragement of other people.” And, yes, we all need help sometimes. Why, it’s even possible that at some point in his I-am-an-island life of self-sufficiency, sure-footedness, and sagacity, Jesse Ventura needed help from someone.



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Crippled by Christianity?

Of course, at this point a secularist might say that crutch or not, religion is crippling. American Atheists president Dave Silverman certainly thinks so, opining in a February Facebook post that we “must recognize the (hyper) religious as mentally damaged.” And this idea is common, too. As Chris Stedman pointed out in his Faithist blog at Religion News Service earlier this year, “Bill Maher has called religion ‘a neurological disorder.’ Sam Harris wrote in *The End of Faith*, ‘it is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions.’ Facebook groups claiming religion is a ‘mental disorder’ or ‘mental disease’ boast hundreds of members, and a list of ‘7 reasons why religion is a form of mental illness’ has been shared on a number of atheist blogs.” And some people of faith have returned the disfavor, with *The Telegraph’s* Sean Thomas rattling cages last year by stating, “The evidence today implies that atheism is a form of mental illness.... Lacking the vital faculty of faith ... should be seen as an affliction, and a tragic deficiency: something akin to blindness. Which makes Richard Dawkins the intellectual equivalent of an amputee, furiously waving his stumps in the air, boasting that he has no hands.” And back and forth it goes. But accusations are easily hurled. What, however, does research actually show?

Before proceeding, it’s important to delve into a defect running through all this commentary. People may attack religion, they may defend religion, but most make the mistake of talking about “religion” — as if it’s a creed as opposed to a category. Someone might suggest that embracing Nazism or Marxism is a mental illness, but would he say adopting “ideology” is? Ideology is a category that includes those two misbegotten examples but also many others, the good, the bad, and the ugly. If someone were to ask, “Is ideology good or bad?” the only logical response is, “Not enough data.” Likewise, “religion” isn’t bad, but there is bad religion. What are we talking about? Christianity or the Cult of Mithras? Judaism or Manichaeism? The primitive, bloodthirsty Aztecs or a Pentecostal parish? Specificity please.

As with different ideologies, since different faiths espouse different values, they cannot all be morally equal (saying otherwise is the mistake of relativism); moreover, this being the case, only one religion would be closest to the Truth. However, focusing on what that might be is beyond this article’s scope. So “religion” henceforth in this piece should be taken to mean the faiths of all, or virtually all, of those studied in the research I will cite. These would mainly be the religions historically present in the modern West: the different brands of Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism (unless otherwise stated).

And this research shows that if religion is a crutch, it just may be the crutch to end all crutches.

Benefits of Belief

As psychologist Patrick F. Fagan, Ph.D. wrote in his 2006 research report “Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability”:

Over the past decade, considerable research has emerged that demonstrates the benefits of religious practice within society. Religious practice promotes the well-being of individuals, families, and the community.

Of particular note are the studies that indicate the benefits of Religion to the poor. Regular attendance at religious services is linked to healthy, stable family life, strong marriages, and well-behaved children. The practice of Religion also leads to a reduction in the incidence of domestic abuse, crime, substance



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abuse, and addiction. In addition, religious practice leads to an increase in physical and mental health, longevity, and education attainment. Moreover, these effects are intergenerational, as grandparents and parents pass on the benefits to the next generations.

And since marriage is the central building block of civilization's central building block, the family, a good place to start is with new research cited in Harvard-trained researcher Shaunti Feldhahn's latest book, *The Good News About Marriage*. Notable is that Feldhahn debunks many widely held myths, such as the notion that 50 percent of marriages end in divorce; in reality, the figure for first-time marriages is 20 to 25 percent. The author also learned that most remarriages succeed and that four out of five marriages are happy. To the point here, however, the book "also reveals the divorce rate among those active in their church is 27 to 50 percent lower than among non-churchgoers," writes CBN News' Paul Strand.

Other researchers have also drawn this conclusion. For example, consider the findings of University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox. As Cybercast News Service wrote in 2008:

Using three nationally representative surveys — the General Social Survey (GSS), the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) — Wilcox found that married church-going Americans across denominational and racial classifications were more likely to describe themselves as "very happy" than their non-religious counterparts.

Couples who attended church regularly were also less likely to divorce than couples who seldom attended church services, Wilcox found.

... Wilcox explained that regular church attendance offers certain positive benefits to a married couple: "Churches supply moral norms like sexual fidelity and forgiveness, family-friendly social networks that lend support to couples facing the ordinary joys and challenges of married life, and a faith that helps couples make sense of the difficulties in their lives — from unemployment to illness — that can harm their marriages."

"So, in a word, the couple that prays together stays together," said Wilcox.

Moreover, as Dr. Fagan points out citing the 2007 study "Are There Religious Variations in Domestic Violence?" by Christopher G. Ellison et al., "Men who attended religious services at least weekly were more than 50 percent less likely to commit an act of violence against their partners than were peers who attended only once a year or less."

Not surprisingly, these faith-derived benefits manifest themselves in the parent-child relationship as well. As Dr. Fagan also wrote:

In general, religious participation appears to foster an authoritative, warm, active, and expressive style of parenting.

... Compared with mothers who did not consider Religion important, those who deemed Religion to be very important rated their relationship with their child significantly higher, according to a 1999 study [Pearce and Axinn, "The Impact of Family Religious Life on the Quality of Mother-Child Relations."].

... Greater religious practice of fathers is associated with better relationships with their children [as well], higher expectations for good relationships in the future, a greater investment in their relationships with their children, a greater sense of obligation to stay in regular contact with their children, and a greater likelihood of supporting their children and grandchildren [according to Valerie



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King, "The Influence of Religion on Fathers' Relationships with Their Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (May 2003), pp. 382-395].

Yet the benefits that accrue from religious practice are so numerous that they can only be related in summary. Some others Dr. Fagan presents at the end of his report are:

- Greater educational aspirations and attainment, especially among the poor;
- Higher levels of good work habits;
- Greater longevity and physical health;
- Higher levels of well-being and happiness;
- Higher recovery rates from addictions to alcohol or drugs; and
- Higher levels of self-control, self-esteem, and coping skills.

And the list goes on. Religious belief and practice also lead to:

- Lower cohabitation rates;
- Lower rates of out-of-wedlock births;
- Lower levels of teen sexual activity;
- Less abuse of alcohol and drugs;
- Lower rates of suicide, depression, and suicide ideation;
- Lower levels of many infectious diseases;
- Less juvenile crime; and
- Less violent crime.

So who's who in the annals of mental illness? Who is right, the Sam HARRises or Sean Thomases of the world? The *Daily Mail's* Anna Edwards puts it in no uncertain terms: "Godliness is the key to healthiness." She then writes, reporting on studies that included not just Christians and Jews but also Buddhists and Muslims in the United States:

Religious people have better mental health than non-believers, new research has revealed.

... Professor Dan Cohen, of the University of Missouri in the United States, said: "Our prior research shows that the mental health of people recovering from different medical conditions, such as cancer, stroke, spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury, appears to be related significantly to positive spiritual beliefs and especially congregational support and spiritual interventions."

... Results showed a higher level of spirituality was related to better mental health, particularly lower levels of neuroticism and greater extraversion....

The researchers believe spirituality may help people's mental health by reducing how self-centred they are and developing their sense of belonging to a larger whole

... The researchers say the selflessness that comes with spirituality enhances characteristics that are important for adopting a global society based on the virtues of peace and cooperation.

But if the religious are more selfless, peaceful, and cooperative, could it be said, perish the thought,



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that they're just nicer? Because this is precisely what Harvard public policy professor Robert Putnam and co-author David Campbell contend in their 2011 book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Reporting on their findings in the September 9, 2011 edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Simon Smart points out that Putnam was described "by London's *Sunday Times* as the most influential academic in the world today" and "is not a religious believer," and then tells us:

Religious people make better citizens and neighbours. Putnam and Campbell write that "for the most part, the evidence we review suggests that religiously observant Americans are more civic, and in some respects simply 'nicer.'"

On every measurable scale, religious Americans are more generous, more altruistic and more involved in civic life than their secular counterparts.

They are more likely to give blood, money to a homeless person, financial aid to family or friends, a seat to a stranger and to spend time with someone who is "a bit down."

And these differences can be profound. As the Barna Group research company reported in 2007, "The typical no-faith American donated just \$200 in 2006, which is more than seven times less than the amount contributed by the prototypical active-faith adult (\$1500)."

So the results are in. "On every measurable scale" religious belief tips the scales in favor of good personal and social outcomes. This is no doubt why research psychologist Allan Bergin, while accepting an award from the American Psychological Association in 1990, summed up religion's impact thus: "Some religious influences have a modest impact whereas another portion seems like the mental equivalent of nuclear energy."

You're Not So Nice

Yet claiming faith yields goodness is the apologetics equivalent of a nuclear attack, raising atheists' ire and often provoking them to point out another personality defect they believe besets the religious. "What does it say about you if you're doing the right thing only because you think somebody [God] is looking over your shoulder?" say the Doubting Dawkinses. "The atheist is a better person because he isn't just doing the right thing for fear of punishment." And, for sure, as the apocryphal saying goes, "Integrity is what you do when nobody is looking." But what these critics don't realize is that good theologians refuted their point long before they even made it.

There are two types of contrition: perfect and imperfect. The first is when you're sorry because you love God, Truth, because you love the good and realize you did wrong; imperfect contrition, however, is when you're sorry only because you fear punishment. And while perfect contrition is vastly superior, both are considered valid for the absolution of sin by some religions. But why? Shouldn't we demand more?

The answer, understood long ago by philosophers, can be explained scientifically by way of famed psychologist Erik Erikson's "Stages of Psychosocial Development." Erikson noted that when a child is in the third stage, "Initiative vs. Guilt," he doesn't yet grasp moral principles and only understands something is wrong if he gets punished for it. Of course, "The hope, as the child approaches the end of this stage, is for feelings of guilt [only experienced after punishment] over a negative initiative to be transformed to feelings of remorse," writes Children's Life Online. What about the occasions, however, when that "hope" is in vain?



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Unfortunately, there is no small number of adults who never become morally developed enough to recognize and love the good and do right simply because it is right. So, sure, you and I may agree that we should be moral for the highest reason, but what about those incapable of this? Do we deny this reality of man's nature and blithely ignore that it must be dealt with? If we did, we would never have developed a criminal-justice system for punishing the stunted "third-stagers."

So given that we human-stagers know enough to see the necessity of not just moral suasion (e.g., PSAs such as "Stop the Hate") but also worldly punishment, should it surprise anyone that an all-knowing being would provide not just a carrot but the stick of otherworldly punishment? This is why, just as a child should love his father but also fear the wrath he'll have to endure from his father if he does wrong, the religious will speak of the love and fear of the Father in Heaven. And this brings to mind an atheist who once, speaking of Christianity's utility, said that he found its decline troubling because he knew it would lead to social breakdown and tyranny. If such a person had a sound grasp of man's psychology and were to develop a religion to help control behavior — a good, lamentably, that too many atheists look only to the government to effect — something akin to the Heaven-Hell model is precisely what he would invent.

This utility of faith (aside from its reality) is no doubt why George Washington warned in his Farewell Address in 1796, "Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." Now, it's important to understand Washington's meaning. He was not saying that an atheist cannot be what we call "moral"; rather, his point was that there is a difference between something being true in principle and being true in the particular. In other words, while an unusual individual (one of "peculiar structure") may reject faith yet be moral, at the level of population ("national morality") this just won't happen. But why not?

I know of a man, of a different kind of peculiar structure, who once told someone close to me, "Murder's not wrong; it's just that society says it is." Likewise, the young Jeffrey Dahmer, who would go on to become one of America's most notorious serial killers, once rhetorically asked his parents, "If there's no God, why can't I just make up my own rules?" What type of thought process brings one to such a point? Were these men crazy? Well, yes, if you consider it crazy taking a certain peculiar but now common world view to its logical conclusion.

Here is the road these men went down: What we call right and wrong can only be determined by one of two things, man or something outside of him. If it's something outside of and above us, something all-knowing, all-powerful, and inerrant — what we call God — then we can say that Absolute Truth exists; we can say it's unchanging, universal, eternal, and non-negotiable. We can say that right and wrong are real. But what are the implications if man is all there is? Well, if we learned that the vast majority of the world loved chocolate but hated vanilla, would we say that this made vanilla "wrong" or "evil"? It would be silly; it's all a matter of taste. But how would it be any different saying murder was wrong or evil if *the only reason we did so* was that the vast majority of the world preferred we not engage in what we consider the "unjust" killing of others? It then, as with flavors, would occupy the realm of taste. Then murder wouldn't really be wrong; it would just be "that society says it is." And then I could "just make up my own rules" because, absent God, that is all man is doing, anyway, and I'm a man myself.

This brings us to my theory as to why serial killers are more intelligent than average: They're smart



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enough to take the road of atheism to its final dead end, but not wise enough to reject it. They think matters through to the wrong conclusion

Another man clever enough to take the dark road less traveled to its terminus is world-renowned botanist Lawrence Trevanion. He has said in certain Internet discussion forums, "There is no such thing as consciousness.... The simple fact is, we regard other people as objects and science can address everything about them as objects.... Evidence suggests that people are evolved objects with an evolved ability to use language." Just like Larry's plants, you see, we're evolved animate objects; though possessing the power of locomotion, we're better described as organic robots, some pounds of chemicals and water. That may sound cold and even sociopathic, but if we have no souls, what else could we be? If we have no spirit, Trevanion is not dead spiritually — he is dead right

Thus is it clear why religiosity yields a more moral, charitable, selfless, and "nicer" society. Oh, you might say you're an atheist and are nicer than the average churchgoer, and you very well might be a person of peculiar structure. But what of national morality? Are people in general more likely to act in a way you might call "good" if they believe morality is something unchanging, universal, eternal, and non-negotiable and that there are consequences for its violation, or if they believe that murder is merely something society says is wrong and that we can just make up our own rules? Are they more likely to treat people well if they believe we're soul-infused beings, made in God's image and destined for eternal life, or if they suppose that we're just objects, organic robots that will, one day soon, disappear into oblivion?

The point is that you may believe theology's principles are the stuff of fairy tales, but what of psychology's principles? It may be faith that we have souls; it may be faith that Truth exists. But organic robots or not, that people behave far differently when they believe in souls and Truth is not faith, but fact. This is the reality of man's nature. And what is it called when a person denies reality, especially a reality that, when accepted and acted upon, yields the kind of society he wants? I don't know if it's called being mentally ill, but it sure is crazy.





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