

INTRODUCTION

Many believe that if religious faith is undermined, morality will collapse and the fabric of society will unravel. Atheism and Humanism are, therefore, dangerous ideas. I can identify no very good argument for the premise of this argument, however.

That claim that morality depends on religion is often made, but what evidence is there that it is true? One of the most popular arguments focuses on a correlation – between, on the one hand, a decline in religious belief, particularly since the middle of the Twentieth Century, and a supposed increase in various social ills over the same period – including the incidence of crime, delinquency, sexually transmitted disease, and so on. It is suggested that this correlation is no accident. There is more crime, delinquency and sexually transmitted disease because there is less religion. The latter is the case of the former. Religion provided us with a moral compass, and without that compass, we are increasingly losing our way.

But is it true that our society is far less moral than it was back in the 1950's? Yes, we have rather different moral attitudes. But that is not necessarily a bad thing. In the 1950's homophobia and racism were rife, and many thought a woman's place was behind the kitchen sink. We have seen some huge moral improvements over the last half-century or so.

Still, there is evidence to suggest that, at least in some respects, we are worse off than we were half a century ago. It appears, for example, that. In the U.K., about six million crimes are now recorded each year. In 1950 the figure was half a million. In the U.S. between 1960 and 1992, citizens experienced a five-fold increase in the rate of violent crime (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault).

Even taking into account differences in the way crime is reported, it is clear there has been a significant increase. Can't this increase be put down to a loss of religious belief?

Not easily. In fact while violent crime is up since 1950, it is actually hugely down (fifty times less) compared to a couple of centuries ago, when our society was very religious indeed. So higher levels of crime clearly can have causes other than reduced levels of religiosity, if, indeed, reduced religiosity is a cause at all. In fact there are many obvious changes that have taken place over the last half century or so that might well explain this recent rise in crime. Here's just one example. During the first half of the Twentieth Century homes were largely occupied during the day and people were less likely to relocate. People tended to know their neighbours and other members of their community very well. As a result, there was far less opportunity for petty crime and burglary. Tightly knit local communities are effective at suppressing crime and delinquency and crime. Their loss is clearly at least as much due to economic factors as it is any decline in religious belief and practice.

So it is by no means obvious that a loss of religious belief is the cause of greater criminality, delinquency, and so on. The mere fact that two things happen at the same time does not establish a causal connection between them (to suppose otherwise is to commit the ad hoc fallacy).

Indeed, a closer look at the evidence begins to suggest that loss of religious belief is not the main cause of the increase in these social ills. For when we look across the world's developed democracies, we find that those that are most religious – including, of course, the United States (where 43% of citizens actually claim to attend church weekly) – tend to have the highest rates of homicide, sexually transmitted disease (STD), abortion and other measures of societal health, with the least religious countries, such as Canada, Japan and Sweden, among the lowest.

So despite the prevalence of the view, there is remarkably little evidence to suggest that loss of religious belief

and practice is the main cause of the West's alleged 'moral malaise'.

Moreover, there is a great deal of evidence against the claim that religious belief is essential for a healthy society. As Francis Fukuyama (the thinker probably best-known for declaring the 'End of History') points out, China also provides an important counter-example to the view that moral order depends on religion:

The dominant cultural force in traditional Chinese society was, of course, Confucianism, which is not a religion at all but rather a rational, secular ethical doctrine. The history of China is replete with instances of moral decline and moral renewal, but none of these is linked particularly to anything a Westerner would call religion. And it is hard to make the case that levels of ordinary morality are lower in Asia than in parts of the world dominated by transcendental religion.

Indeed, from the point of view of other cultures, the widespread Western assumption that people won't be good without God is quite baffling, as the Chinese writer and inventor Lin Yu Tang, here points out:

To the West, it seems hardly imaginable that the relationship between man and man (morality) could be maintained without reference to a Supreme Being, while to the Chinese it is equally amazing that men should not, or could not, behave toward one another as decent beings without thinking of their indirect relationship through a third party.

There is also a growing body of scientific evidence that our morality is, to some degree, a product of our natural, evolutionary history. Certain moral attitudes are universal. The world over, people have the same basic moral intuitions about stealing, lying and killing, irrespective of whether or

not they are religious. The world over, people are drawn to something like the Golden Rule: do as you would be done by. Why?

There is good empirical evidence that our moral intuitions about what we ought, or ought not, to do were, at least in part, written into our genes long before they were written down in any religious book (I recommend Matt Ridley's *The Origins of Virtue* as a primer on this topic). Religion is not the causal source of morality. Religions merely codify (and fossilize) the kind of basic morality to which we are naturally disposed anyway (in some cases adding a few additional idiosyncratic prohibitions of their own, e.g. on certain food-stuffs and sexual practices). Even Darwin recognized that our moral intuitions and inclinations are an outcome of our evolved, social nature:

The social instincts acquired by man will from the first have given to him some wish to aid his fellows, some feeling of sympathy, and have compelled him to regard their approbation and disapprobation. Such impulses will have served him at a very early period as a rude rule of right and wrong... The social instincts – the prime principle of man's moral constitution – with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, 'As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise'; and this lies at the foundation of morality.

The impulse to behave morally is, in the first instance, natural and instinctive, rather than acquired through exposure to religion.

Of course, there is little doubt that religion has helped some people turn their lives around. I have heard several anecdotes about convicts who have 'found God', and, as a result, have stopped committing crimes and started helping others. There is no doubt that exposure to religion can have such dramatic effects on people's behaviour, particularly individuals who have hitherto led deeply troubled and destructive lives, though the extent to which it is religion per se that has this redeeming effect, rather than, say

exposure to people who show a genuine interest in prisoner and their welfare is debatable (we should also remember that plenty of prisoners have also found the same sort of redemption through philosophy or education; it might even turn out that these alternatives are actually rather more effective in helping prisoners forge a better life).

However, the observation that religion has had such an effect on the behaviour of some troubled individuals provides little support for the view that without widespread religion people won't be good and civilization is likely to collapse. After all, Big-Brother-style torture and brainwashing would probably also be very effective in controlling criminal behaviour. That fact would hardly support the view that, without widespread torture and brainwashing, people won't be good and civilization is likely to collapse.

In many religious circles that claim people won't be good without God has become a mantra, endlessly repeated to the point where everyone assumes it must be true. Yet it is not well-supported by the evidence. Indeed, what evidence there is appears straightforwardly to falsify it.

In order to deal with the, for them, embarrassing observation that across the West atheists and agnostics are generally behaving rather well (at least as well as their religious counterparts), some religious thinkers appeal to the notion of moral capital. They suggest that our religious heritage has produced a reserve of moral capital which today's humanists are currently drawing on. Eventually, this capital will run out and moral chaos will ensue. We need quickly to replenish that religious moral capital if we are to avoid disaster.

Irving Kristol (so-called 'godfather' of neoconservatism) takes this view:

For well over 150 years now, social critics have been warning us that bourgeois society was living off the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion and traditional moral philosophy.

So does the neoconservative Gerturde Himmelfarb, who claims we are:

...living off the religious capital of a previous generation and that that capital is being perilously depleted.

Ronald Reagan's Supreme Court nominee Judge Robert K. Bork concurs:

We all know persons without religious belief who nevertheless display all the virtues we associate with religious teaching...such people are living on the moral capital of prior religious generations... that moral capital will be used up eventually...

Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford recently raised the same worry:

...many people who have strong moral commitments without any religious foundation were shaped by parents or grandparents for whom morality and religion were fundamentally bound up. Moreover, many of those in the forefront of progressive political change, who have abandoned religion, have been driven by a humanism that has essentially been built up by our Christian heritage... How far are we living on moral capital?

This appeal to moral capital provides religious predictors of doom with a convenient explanation for the fact that today's atheists and agnostics behave at least as well as their religious counterparts. These non-religious folk are living off religious moral capital, capital that is running out, but has not entirely run out yet.

There are at least two serious problems with this kind of appeal to 'moral capital'.

First of all, we might ask: what evidence is there to suggest that the 'moral capital' explanation is actually

correct? There appears to be little. It is invoked, not because there is good evidence to support it, but simply because it provides religious doom-mongers with a convenient carpet under which to sweep evidence against their own claims.

Indeed, notice that the moral capital move appears to make the claim that Western civilization will fall into moral chaos without religion unfalsifiable, at least in the short to medium term. No matter how well-behaved atheists and agnostics continue to be, decade after decade, century after century, all that evidence that Westerners can and will continue to be good without religious belief can be swept aside with the rebuff: 'Ah, but that's just because the religious moral capital has not run out yet.'

Secondly, the moral capital move in any case fails to deal with much of the evidence against the claim that believing in God is a necessary condition of our being good. For example, it spectacularly fails to explain why countries such as China have survived, and indeed often flourished, over millennia without belief in God. It also fails to deal with the growing scientific evidence that the impulse to behave morally is natural and instinctive, and not dependent on exposure to religion.

This is an extract from Stephen Law's Humanism: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2011)

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Editor THINK

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