

Driven by God

The evidence is clear that murder, venereal disease and marital breakdown are all more common in religious cultures

Are religious societies better than secular ones? It should be an easy question for atheists to answer. Most of those now seeking to blow people up – whether with tanks and missiles or rucksacks and passenger planes – do so in the name of God. In India, we see men whose religion forbids them to harm insects setting light to human beings. A 14th-century pope with a 21st-century communications network sustains his church's mission of persecuting gays and denying women ownership of their bodies. Bishops and rabbis in Britain have just united in the cause of prolonging human suffering by opposing the legalisation of assisted suicide. We know that the most dangerous human trait is an absence of self-doubt, and that self-doubt is more likely to be absent from the mind of the believer than the infidel.

But we also know that few religious governments have committed atrocities on the scale of Hitler's, Mao's or Stalin's (though, given their more limited means, the Spanish and British in the Americas, the British, Germans and Belgians in Africa and the British in Australia and India could be said to have done their best). It is hard to dismiss Dostoyevsky's suspicion that "if God does not exist, then everything is permissible". Nor can we wholly disagree with the new Pope when he warns that "we are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which ... has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires". (We must trust, of course, that a man who has spent his life campaigning to become God's go-between, and who now believes he is infallible, is immune to such impulses.) The creationists in the United States might be as mad as a

box of ferrets, but what they claim to fear is the question which troubles almost everyone who has stopped to think about it: if our lives have no purpose, why should we care about other people's?

We know too, as Roy Hattersley argued in *The Guardian* last month, that “good works ... are most likely to be performed by people who believe that heaven exists. The correlation is so clear that it is impossible to doubt that faith and charity go hand in hand”. The only two heroes I have met are both Catholic missionaries. Joe Haas, an Austrian I stayed with in the swamp forests of West Papua, had spent his life acting as a human shield for the indigenous people of Indonesia; every few months soldiers threatened to kill him when he prevented them from murdering his parishioners and grabbing their land.

Frei Adolfo, the German I met in the savannas of north-eastern Brazil, thought, when I first knocked on his door, that I was a gunman the ranchers had sent for him. Yet still he opened it. With the other liberation theologians in the Catholic church, he offered the only consistent support to the peasants being attacked by landowners and the government. If they did not believe in God, these men would never have taken such risks for other people.

Remarkably, no one, until now, has attempted systematically to answer the question with which this column began. But in the current edition of the *Journal of Religion and Society*, a researcher called Gregory Paul tests the hypothesis, propounded by evangelists in the Bush administration, that religion is associated with lower rates of “lethal violence, suicide, non-monogamous sexual activity and abortion”. He compared data from 18 developed democracies, and discovered that the Christian fundamentalists couldn't have got it more wrong.

“In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion ... None of the strongly secularised, pro-evolution democracies is experiencing high levels of measurable dysfunction.” Within the US, “the strongly theistic, anti-evolution south and midwest” have “markedly worse homicide, mortality, STD, youth pregnancy, marital and related problems than the north-east where ... secularisation, and acceptance of evolution approach European norms”.

Three sets of findings stand out: the associations between religion – especially absolute belief – and juvenile mortality, venereal disease and adolescent abortion. Paul's graphs show far higher rates of death among the under-fives in Portugal, the US and Ireland and put the US – the most religious country in his survey – in a league of its own for gonorrhoea and syphilis. Strangest of all, for those who believe that Christian societies are “pro-life”, is the finding that “increasing adolescent abortion rates show

positive correlation with increasing belief and worship of a creator ... Claims that secular cultures aggravate abortion rates (John Paul II) are therefore contradicted by the quantitative data”.

These findings appear to match the studies of teenage pregnancy I’ve read. The rich countries in which sexual abstinence campaigns, generally inspired by religious belief, are strongest have the highest early pregnancy rates. The US is the only rich nation with teenage pregnancy levels comparable to those of developing nations: it has a worse record than India, the Philippines and Rwanda. Because they’re poorly educated about sex and in denial about what they’re doing (and so less likely to use contraceptives), boys who participate in abstinence programmes are more likely to get their partners pregnant than those who don’t.

Is it fair to blame all this on religion? While the rankings cannot reflect national poverty – the US has the world’s fourth highest GDP per head, Ireland the eighth – the nations that do well in Paul’s study also have higher levels of social spending and distribution than those which do badly. Is this a cause or an association? In other words, are religious societies less likely to distribute wealth than secular ones? In the US, where governments are still guided by the Puritan notions that money is a sign that you’ve been chosen by God and poverty is a mark of moral weakness, Christian belief seems to be at odds with the dispersal of wealth. But the UK – one of the most secular societies in the study – is also one of the least inclusive, and does rather worse in his charts than countries with similar levels of religion. The broad trend, however, looks clear: “The more secular, pro-evolution democracies have ... come closest to achieving practical ‘cultures of life’.”

I don’t know whether these findings can be extrapolated to other countries and other issues: the study doesn’t look, for example, at whether religious belief is associated with a nation’s preparedness to go to war (though I think we could hazard a pretty good guess) or whether religious countries in the poor world are more violent and have weaker cultures of life than secular ones. Nor – because, with the exception of Japan, the countries in his study are predominantly Christian or post-Christian – is it clear whether there’s an association between social dysfunction and religion in general or simply between social dysfunction and Christianity.

However, if we are to accept the findings of this one – and so far only – wide survey of belief and human welfare, the message to those who claim in any sense to be pro-life is unequivocal. If you want people to behave as Christians advocate, you should tell them that God does not exist.