

Who Needs God When We've Got Mammon?

The world's most prosperous (and happiest) countries are also its least religious, new research states.

By: [David Villano](#) | November 24, 2009 | 05:00 AM (PDT) |

Controversial researcher finds the world's most prosperous and happiest countries are also its least religious. (stockxpert.com)

From Dostoyevsky to right-wing commentator Ann Coulter we are warned of the perils of godlessness. "If there is no God," Dostoyevsky wrote, "everything is permitted." Coulter routinely attributes our nation's most intractable troubles to the moral vacuum of atheism.

But a growing body of research in what one sociologist describes as the "emerging field of secularity" is challenging long-held assumptions about the relationship of religion and effective governance.

In a [paper](#) posted recently on the online journal *Evolutionary Psychology*, independent researcher [Gregory S. Paul](#) reports a strong correlation within First World democracies between socioeconomic well-being and secularity. In short, prosperity is highest in societies where religion is practiced least.

Using existing data, Paul combined 25 indicators of societal and economic stability — things like crime, suicide, drug use, incarceration, unemployment, income, abortion and public corruption — to score each country using what he calls the "successful societies scale." He also scored countries on their degree of religiosity, as determined by such measures as church attendance, belief in a creator deity and acceptance of Bible literalism.

Comparing the two scores, he found, with little exception, that the least religious countries enjoyed the most prosperity. Of particular note, the U.S. holds the distinction of *most religious* and *least prosperous* among the 17 countries included in the study, ranking last in 14 of the 25 socioeconomic measures.

Paul is quick to point out that his study reveals correlation, not causation. Which came first — prosperity or secularity — is unclear, but Paul ventures a guess. While it's possible that good governance and socioeconomic health are byproducts of a secular society, more likely, he speculates, people are inclined to drop their attachment to religion once they feel distanced from the insecurities and burdens of life.

"Popular religion," Paul proposes, "is a coping mechanism for the anxieties of a dysfunctional social and economic environment." Paul, who was [criticized](#), mostly on statistical [grounds](#), for a similar study published in 2005, says his new findings lend support to the belief that mass acceptance of popular religion is determined more by environmental influences and less by selective, evolutionary forces, as scholars and philosophers have long debated.

In other words, we're not hardwired for religion.

Paul also believes his study helps refute the controversial notion that the moral foundation of religious doctrine is a requisite for any high-functioning society – what he dubs the “moral-creator hypothesis.”

Phil Zuckerman, a sociologist at Pitzer College whose research looks at the link between religion and societal health within the developed world, agrees with that assertion. “The important thing we’re seeing here is that progressive, highly functional societies can answer their problems within a framework of secularity. That’s a big deal, and we should be blasting that message out loud,” he contends.

Zuckerman says the findings are consistent with his own data, collected for his 2008 book *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment* — a portrait of secular society in Denmark and Sweden — and his forthcoming *Faith No More: How and Why People Reject Religion*.

Scandinavian countries, in particular, have achieved high levels of economic strength and social stability, and yet the influence of religion there is in steep decline, perhaps the lowest in recoded history. Coincidence or not, those countries also rank among the world’s happiest **populations**. In The Netherlands’ Erasmus University Rotterdam’s annual **World Database of Happiness** the same Northern European countries that score low in religiosity rank high in reported levels of happiness. (The U.S ranked 27th).

What’s their secret? Zuckerman believe it lies in the historically strong sense of community — perhaps a survival response to long, harsh winters – that transcends religious life in these northern climates. Social well-being, economic strength (and happiness) are products of community interaction, not faith, Zuckerman conjectures.

If that’s true — and other researchers, such as influential Yale psychologist **Paul Bloom**, are touting the idea that mass religion’s greatest value lies in the web of personal interaction it weaves — then societies that reject religion may suffer if strong secular institutions are not in place to maintain community bonds and foster positive civic associations. Social interactions both inside and outside church structure, Bloom recently **wrote**, is far more beneficial than “a belief in constant surveillance by a higher power.”

Indeed, researchers in a variety of other studies are targeting the positive effects of church-based **social interaction**. One study published earlier this year in the **Journal of Happiness Studies** concluded that the quality and depth of personal relationships has a far greater effect on children’s happiness than does religious practice itself — church attendance, prayer, meditation. In many American communities, organized religion is the principal conduit to those kinds of close relationships, as well as to civic action and problem-solving.

Zuckerman warns against hasty emulation of the Danes and Swedes. “We can’t just say that secularity is good for society and religion is bad,” he warns. “And nor can we say the opposite. The connections are very complex.”

Paul is less compromising, characterizing organized religion, particularly the conservative Christian brand widely practiced in the U.S., as societal anathema, conspiring against real progress.

In his paper, Paul writes of an “antagonistic relationship between better socioeconomic conditions and intense popular faith” derived from fear that greater prosperity will loosen the grip of religion. That antagonism, though subtle, is evident in the debate over health care, he argues, noting the intense opposition of such groups as the Christian Coalition to universal coverage and other progressive, European-style fixes.

“These groups have a lot to lose in these kinds of debates. When you adopt progressive policy reforms,” Paul says, “in the long run, religion is bound to be road kill.”

Paul, 54, lives in Baltimore and is not affiliated with any university or think tank. He is largely self-taught. He has published three respected books on paleontology, claiming naming rights to a handful of species, and he earns a living as an artist and illustrator of [prehistoric creatures](#). He migrated to the field of secular studies to wage a kind of scholarly assault on the right-wing fundamentalists who challenge both the evolutionary assumptions of paleontology and, it follows, his livelihood.

He isn't shy about promoting progressive policy reforms and is quick to blame the Christian right for a range of societal dysfunctions. (A recent study published in the journal *Reproductive Health* found that states whose residents have more conservative religious beliefs have higher rates of teenagers giving birth).

Yet in spite of his findings, and his secularist agenda, Paul stops short of proposing measures to suppress the role and influence of religion in America. Why? It's already happening, he insists. Although we remain largely a nation of believers, our faith and commitment are slipping. Religious affiliation, church attendance and belief in God are all in slow decline in the U.S. A recent [Gallup poll](#) found that two-thirds of adults believe the influence of religion in American life is waning, up from 50 percent just four years ago.

As these trends continue, he believes, policymaking will more effectively address the true needs of society, rather than the dogma of religious idealism. “People need to know that society without religion is not a bad thing,” Paul says. “And we're seeing this in other countries. We don't need religion to have a thriving, prosperous nation.”