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## Does religion foster generosity?



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent studies that claim to provide support, through statistical analysis of survey data, for the traditional proposition that being religious makes people more generous. The studies have serious shortcomings. First, the data consist exclusively of self-reports. Second, the dependent and independent variables are conceptually problematic and ill-defined. Third, even if there is a positive correlation between religious involvement and personal generosity, it may be due to selection bias. Thus, these studies do not provide serious evidence for the traditional hypothesis. Moreover, it has been directly controverted by experimental studies of economic and other behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decade or so, several studies have claimed to offer strong empirical support for the hypothesis that religion has beneficial consequences for individuals and for society as a whole. According to these authors, careful survey data analysis reveals that religious participation generates social capital (Putnam, 2000); that it fosters civic responsibility (Monsma, 2007; Smidt, den Dulk, Penning, Monsma, & Koopman, 2008); that it boosts volunteering (Campbell & Yonish, 2003) and charitable giving (Bekkers & Schuyt, 2008; Brooks, 2004; Bryant, Jeon-Slaughter, Kang, & Tax, 2003; Havens, O'Herlihy, & Schervish, 2002; Hodgkinson, Weitzman, & Kirsch, 1990; Independent Sector, 2002; Nemeth & Luidens, 2003; Regnerus, Smith, & Sikkink, 1998; Wang & Graddy, 2008); that it makes people more generous (Brooks, 2003, 2005, 2006; Putnam &

Campbell, 2010; Weipking & Maas, 2009); and that it promotes empathy and altruism (Smith, 2006).

Of course, this hypothesis is not new; it is traditional, so all the authors cited above are identified as traditionalists in this study. What is new is their claim that the traditional hypothesis is strongly supported by quantitative evidence. The data are from widely respected sources such as the General Social Survey (National Data Program for the Sciences, 1972–2008), the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (Saguaro Seminar, 2001), and surveys from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (see for example Pew Research Center, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Putnam and Campbell (2010) also draw on the 2006 and 2007 Faith Matters surveys (International Communications Research), which were commissioned specifically for them and funded by the John Templeton Foundation (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 557). It should be noted that the works mentioned in this paragraph are based almost entirely on data taken in the United States. The exceptions are the studies of Bekkers and Schuyt (2008) and Weipking and Maas (2009), which were conducted in the Netherlands.

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Two books stand out from this body of work for the scope and forcefulness of their claims: *Who Really Cares?* by Arthur Brooks (2006) and *American Grace* by Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010). “When it comes to charity,” writes Brooks (2006, p. 2), “America is two nations—one charitable, the other uncharitable.” Compared to the non-religious, he says, “religious people are, inarguably, more charitable in every measurable way” (p. 40, emphasis in the original). Putnam and Campbell (2010, pp. 453–454) vigorously agree:

Some Americans are more generous than others. . . . In particular, religiously observant Americans are more generous with time and treasure than demographically similar secular Americans. . . . The pattern is so robust that evidence of it can be found in virtually every major national survey of American religious and social behavior. Any way you slice it, religious people are simply more generous.<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that these findings are invalidated by an array of methodological faults. First, the data consist exclusively of self-reports, which are known to be unreliable. Second, both the dependent and the independent variables are conceptually problematic. The word “religiosity” can refer to many different phenomena; there are no objective criteria with which to identify the most significant ones or to judge whether the presence of any of them qualifies the bearer as truly religious. Nor can generosity be measured directly, at least if it is understood in its traditional sense, as a virtue. In the studies in question, generosity is operationalized as relatively higher levels of tax-deductible charitable contributions. This is misleading in two ways. First, tax-deductible giving is not the same thing as being generous. Second, the tax-deductible donations reliably associated with religious participation mostly go to churches; and most church spending goes to other than humanitarian purposes.

Furthermore, even if there is a positive correlation between religious involvement and generosity, it could be due to selection bias—that is, the direction of causality may be the opposite of what is typically assumed. Putnam and Campbell identify what they call “religious social networks” as a cause of generosity; this conclusion results from assuming, rather than demonstrating, that the network effects they identify in their data are due to specifically religious factors.

Finally, I argue that the traditional hypothesis has been directly controverted by experimental studies of economic and other behaviors.

## 2. Methodological challenges in studies of survey data

Religion and its effects are difficult to study. Religion is surrounded by misconceptions, many of which are

entertained even by experienced sociologists. Mark Chaves (2010, p. 6) writes that sociology of religion is afflicted by the “religious congruence fallacy,” whose “telltale sign . . . is a regression model in which the coefficients attached to religious service attendance, religious belief, or religious affiliation are interpreted causally.” In other words, “almost every claim of the form, ‘People act in a certain way because they are in a particular religion or because they attend religious services or because they hold this or that religious belief’” is based on a misunderstanding.

### 2.1. Self-reporting and social desirability bias

The traditionalists’ data come entirely from surveys. It is well known (Cahalan, 1969; Parry & Crossley, 1950; Phillips & Clancy, 1972) that survey responses are subject to social desirability (SD) bias, the tendency of respondents to adjust their responses toward conformity with social norms. As Goffman (1959, p. 35) points out, every response is given in the context of a social performance. “When the individual presents himself before others, his performances will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole.” People tend to over-report socially encouraged behaviors, such as philanthropy, and under-report socially deprecated behaviors, such as drug abuse. Holtzman and Kagan (1995, ch. 1, p. 5) find that “there is often a minimal correlation, or none at all” between self-reports and related external measures (such as of behavior). Doris (2002, p. 179, n. 42) notes that “failures of behavior to conform with avowed values and self-conceptions are well documented in psychology” and cites several examples.

Studies of generosity are especially vulnerable to SD bias. The classic papers on SD bias examined responses on topics such as voting, sexuality, and drug use. But generosity is not merely subject to social desirability, as those topics are; it is the epitome. Nothing evokes social approbation more consistently than generosity—with the possible exception, in some communities, of church attendance. This means that we should be maximally skeptical regarding people’s reports of their own generosity. This applies to volunteering as much as it does to monetary donations.

SD bias can skew results in another, less obvious way. If groups of respondents differ in the degree or direction of their SD bias, this can create spurious correlations or mask real correlations between variables (Bell & Buchanan, 1966; Ganster, Hennessey, & Luthans, 1983; Presser & Traugott, 1992; Stocké & Hunkler, 2007). For example, in a study of the relation between age and various psychological measures such as agreeableness and conscientiousness, Soubelet and Salthouse (2011, p. 758) find that social desirability accounts for 50% of the age-related variance in eight self-report variables.

When we come to religion, measurement problems proliferate.

Self-report measures . . . fail to make a distinction among (1) what people say they believe, value, and do; (2) what they honestly believe they believe, value, and do; and (3) what they actually believe, value, and do. . . .

<sup>2</sup> Putnam and Campbell (2010) do not, of course agree, with everything in Brooks (2006). In particular, they differ strongly with Brooks’s assertion that political conservatism is associated with generosity, calling it “an elementary statistical mistake” (pp. 457–458; see also note 28, pp. 632–633).

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