

Religion, Average Life Expectancy and Progress

In the words God and religion, I see darkness, gloom, chains and whips.

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The Book of Genesis tells us that God originally intended to create Adam and Eve with eternal life. However, the curious Eve disobeyed the Creator and ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge against God's will. After this act of license, Jehovah God said:

“Here the man has become like one of us in knowing good and bad, and now in order that he may not put his hand out and actually take [fruit] also from the tree of life and eat and live to time indefinite,” – with that Jehovah God put him out of the garden of Eden...and posted at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubs and the flaming blade of a sword that was turning itself continually to guard the way to the tree of life.¹

Thus, God put a barrier in the way of the tree of life, i.e., in the way of learning how to achieve immortality. Only in the Book of Revelation do we learn that eternal life is promised only for the “sealed.” Let me remind you: “Who were sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the sons of Israel” (Revelation 7:4). In other words, eternal life is not even for all the sons of Israel, but only for the “sealed.” As for those who are not sons of Israel, “let there be memory eternal to us.”

Fables are fables and legends are legends, of course, but religion has played its negative role regarding cognition in general and the cognition of human life in particular. It played, plays, and will continue playing it for some time.

In the preceding pages, I have told many times how religion negatively influenced the development of societies, especially in Europe during the Middle Ages. After numerous scientific revolutions, beginning in the 19th century, the role of religion started declining as evidenced by statistical data for advanced countries.

Before presenting this topic, I should stress that at the present time – or, more exactly, throughout the 20th century and perhaps even earlier – there has been no direct correlation between religion and ALE increase compared to the obscurantist Middle Ages period. The explanation is simple. First, achievements of science, especially in the area of medicine, spread throughout the globe due to the world's internationalization. Second, the believers are, to a man, great cynics: they believe in God yet prefer to care for their health based on the achievements of science. Moreover, they fly in airplanes and drive around in automobiles instead of walking “across Palestines,” as their teacher once did. In other words, modern believers make use of all the benefits of civilization that became possible thanks to science and technology. There is nothing surprising about this since religion is good at night, as one theologian put it, while during the daytime, science is better. Nonetheless, religion is historically doomed, as evidenced by statistics.

It is perfectly obvious that the number of believers must have contracted substantially in the 19th century, the century of scientific explosion. Perhaps some statistical data do exist on that account. What I have is some sample statistical data for the 20th century that show the decline of religion's importance in all advanced countries. In England, the pace of this process must have been especially brisk, as British priests themselves have been compelled to admit with bitterness. Thus, *The UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends* (2004) indicates that, over the last 15 years, the number of believers has declined by more than a million, and, by 2005, it would have been down to 5.6 million people. In that period, the number of church buildings declined by 1,400 and the number of priests by 1,000. The number of churchgoers is also in decline. Only about 19% of English Protestants go to church at least monthly, while in Catholic countries, this share is much higher: in Spain and Austria, 35%; in Slovakia, Portugal, and Italy, over 50%; in Ireland, 67%; and in Poland, a whopping

¹ New World translation of the Holy Scriptures (1984). [REDACTED]

78%. However, in Catholic France, only 12% of the French favor God, and the rest prefer cafés to church.² (A Dutch source gives different figures: in Ireland, under 60%; in Italy, about 40%; in Spain, 19%; in Greece, about 17%; in Belgium, 16%; in Holland, 15%; in Britain, 15%; in Germany, 14%; in France, 8%; in Sweden, about 5%; in Denmark, 2–3%.³) It is necessary to point out at the same time that many people see churchgoing as not a tribute to religion, but as an opportunity to meet friends and acquaintances.

The Economist quotes curious figures concerning Spain. For many years, almost 90% of Spaniards called themselves Catholics. By the start of 2003, the number was down to 80%. However, what do those 80% signify? It turns out that as recently as 1975, 61% of Spaniards went to church regularly; by the start of 2000, it was only 19%, and 46% of the people who call themselves Catholics did not go to church at all. Things are not good with the supply of priests, either. In 1952, Spain had 77,800 of them; in 2002, only 18,500 were left, and 10–15% of parishes had no priests at all. In 1952, there were 7,050 seminarians; today there are 1,800 (*Economist*, *ibid.*).

Similar problems exist in Germany, where the church superiors initiated a reform. They were forced to agree to reforms due to the fall of the church's revenues and the drop in parishioners' numbers. One of the measures proposed was the reduction of the number of Lutheran pastors in Germany by a quarter over the next 25 years. The current pastoral staff – 22,000 people – would be reduced to 16,500 by 2030. It is also planned to reduce other church staff, but it has not been determined yet by how much.⁴

The picture is somewhat different in the USA and Canada. By formal indicators, these countries are considered more religious than European ones. The numbers of godless are increasing but not by much. In Canada, for example, the number of atheists only grew from 4% in 1971 to 12% in 1992. In the USA, there are even fewer: the increase was from 3% to 8% (in 2005). The majority of people do consider themselves believers, after all. Church attendance, however, declined by much more: from 60% in 1945 to 20% in 1990. It is not that important. What is important is that the so-called believers simply do not know what they believe in. When socializing with believers in Canada, I discovered to my surprise that, save for active church members, almost no one knows the Bible, either the Old or the New Testament. My limited "research" was confirmed by the survey conducted in 1994 by the essayist Cullen Murphy among 1,200 people aged 15 to 35. The majority of the respondents managed to recall only two of the Almighty's Ten Commandments. When Murphy told them all the commandments, "they [the respondents] weren't very happy to learn of them."⁵ A survey with a broader inclusion of population by age conducted during the junior Bush's presidency produced results that were not much better: 60% of Americans could not even name five of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses, while half of the high school students in the USA believe that Sodom and Gomorrah were a married couple. These are the data quoted by specialists from Boston University. This is natural since the commandment "thou shalt not steal," for example, contradicts the whole system of capitalism at its root. As Proudhon used to say long ago, property is in itself theft.

Since religious commandments do not fit with modern capitalist values, some ideologues have started inventing new commandments. For example, one shall not steal, but creative work on your tax return is OK. In other words, cheating the state is not a sin; it is OK with God. One shall not kill, except during any trimester of pregnancy or if the Pentagon says it must be done. One shall not commit adultery, except if the person is unhappy or if personal fulfillment points you toward that new secretary in your office. And so on and so forth – it looks very dialectical.

Stephen Prothero, head of the religious studies department at Boston University, thinks that Americans' deep indifference to religious issues is currently acquiring an almost dangerous nature.⁶

Here is a list of the world's most atheistic countries.⁷ The top ten are comprised by Sweden (it is estimated that the number of atheists there is between 45% and 85%), Vietnam (81%), Denmark (43–80%), Norway

² *Times* (London [redacted])

³ *Economist* [redacted]

⁴ NEWSru.com [redacted]

⁵ *US News & World Report* [redacted]

⁶ NEWSru.com [redacted]

⁷ Based on the data of America's Pitzer College, which published a list of the world's 50 most atheistic countries as of the year 2005. [redacted]

(31%–72%), Japan (64–65%), the Czech Republic (54–61%), Finland (28–60%), France (43–54%), South Korea (30–52%), and Estonia (49%). Russia holds the 12th spot in the list (24–48%). This rating does not take into account China and North Korea, where atheism is the official doctrine of the state.

Even though, as mentioned already, the visible interconnection between religion and ALE is obscured today, the connection becomes immediately evident when analysis encompasses long stretches of time. The interconnection between religion and progress – which was understood most often as purely economic progress – has been noted since long ago, though perhaps not as often as it deserves. Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) is considered a classic work on this topic; it shows the positive influence of the former on the development of the latter, unlike Catholicism. Bourgeois sociology, however, deals very cautiously with this problem, especially in its blunt formulation: does religion or religiosity of the population facilitate progress (they ordinarily write “development”) or not? When answering this straightforward question, sociologists start squirming like eels in a frying pan since the obvious answer, *no*, does not suit them (it's liable to cost one his job) while an unequivocal *yes* would not be believed by any man in his right mind. They then recur to the “scientific method,” which enables them to say *yes* and *no* at the same time. According to *The Economist*, the works of the well-known American economists Robert J. Barro and his ally Rachel M. McCleary are examples of such sophistry. Two of their works⁸, which differ only in nuances, initially came to such conclusions: “Although religiosity declines overall with economic development, the nature of the response varies with the dimension of development.” (2002, Abstract). Based on analysis of a large volume of statistical material, Barro and McCleary found that education positively affects the spread of religiosity and churchgoing while urbanization affects it negatively (i.e., in cities, fewer people believe and go to church). In turn, religiosity affects ALE negatively and leads to lower birth rates. And here is the main point: Barro and McCleary found that economic growth reacts well to certain religious beliefs (heaven, hell, afterlife), but it is affected negatively by churchgoing. That is, from the perspective of economic growth, it is better to believe than to belong. Believing and belonging appear to be two independent external variables.

In Barro and McCleary's explanation, it is curious why faith integrates well with learning and science in general. It turns out that religious beliefs in heaven, hell, and the afterlife “require a considerable degree of abstraction or ‘faith.’ Scientific analysis – and theoretical reasoning generally – also require a capacity for abstraction. If more educated persons are more capable of the abstractions needed to think scientifically, then they may also be more able or willing to make the abstractions needed to support religious beliefs. Therefore, from this perspective, more educated persons might be more religious” (ibid., 23–24).

This was written by people who surely consider themselves to be scientists. They evidently mixed up abstract thinking and figurative thinking. They do not even realize that abstract thinking is the aerobatics of science; it is the analysis on the level of categories and concepts. Only a handful of people possess this capacity, even among those who work in science. Faith and abstract thinking reside on opposite poles of the human consciousness. To believe, it suffices to be a child or to be perfectly illiterate; to think abstractly, the person needs not only education but also constant training, the ability to think in philosophical or mathematical terms, etc.

The authors devoted much attention to issues unrelated to the topic of their research, which can, however, indeed be of interest in themselves (for example, the issue of the “religions marketplace” or religious pluralism; the issue of state religion and religion governed by the state). They hint indirectly that the less religious freedom, the slower the economic growth. That much is clear, though, even without delving into details. It suffices to compare rates and scales of economic growth over long time periods among the larger Muslim states (Iran, Iraq, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh), Catholic states (Spain, Italy, Portugal), and Protestant states to come to the obvious conclusion about the negative impact of religious monopoly. However, in the smaller Protestant states such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland, very high ALE and stable economic growth are observed despite a religious monopoly. This means that something else compensates for that negative factor. In fact, these states are the most atheistic ones in the West.

The authors made a curious “discovery”: in communist regimes – the designation the authors use for socialist countries – the attitude toward churchgoing and religious belief was extremely negative. Praise the Lord: after these regimes' collapse, both started growing, and at a very fast pace. It would seem that God Himself gave the authors the opportunity to demonstrate that when the communist regimes collapsed, and faith and Church were restored, the economy started growing at unprecedented rates. The authors, though, kept modestly mum about it for some reason, even though statistical data are abundant. This is why they kept mum: during the existence of the Soviet Union, which was an atheist state (although no one ever banned

⁸ Barro and McCleary, [REDACTED]

religion there), the country turned from a backward state in the backyard of Europe into a superpower, more than doubled ALE over a short historical time period, and made a giant leap in education and science, becoming an example to be imitated for the whole world. As for the period after 1991 when the USSR disintegrated, over an extraordinarily short time more than half of manufacturing was practically destroyed in the Russian Federation, the country dropped to 118th place in the world in the ALE department, and the health care and education systems collapsed – and all this was going on while nearly three quarters of the population became exceedingly religious, and there were more churches built than schools (schools are being destroyed, for the most part). So where is the positive impact of the belief in God, heaven, hell, and the afterlife?

The authors are incorrect and unscientific in avoiding discussion of China, where atheism is likewise enshrined at the official level. It is currently, after all, the world's most dynamic country. Moreover, the authors even skirt Japan, the country where people do not believe in heaven, hell or the afterlife while going to temples more frequently than Europeans go to church. However, for the Japanese, visiting a temple is a purely cultural act. The share of atheists in that country is high, too – 64–65%, as mentioned already.

In their second work (2003), Barro and McCleary repeat the preceding thesis: even though religiosity is in decline, churchgoing affects economic growth negatively (their explanation is ridiculous: allegedly the cost of churchgoing is high in terms of time, expenses, and diversion from business matters) while beliefs “produce the trend of increased economic growth.” The authors add here, “There is also indication that the stick represented by the fear of hell is more potent for growth than the carrot from the prospect of heaven” (2003, 37).

In America, indeed, the majority of the population is believers while pure atheists and agnostics are not very numerous – and yet the economy is still growing at a passable rate, and, in general, the USA is the top economic power in the world. This objection is inevitable.

Such objectors do not realize that development of the economy and the main criterion of progress – ALE and population increase – are not that directly linked to religion in the present day. The impact of religion was enormous in the Middle Ages because it was the basis on which all states were built, and it was the ruling classes' sole ideological weapon. Today, in the USA, a lot has changed; and most importantly, religion itself has changed as well as the attitude toward religion of even those people who call themselves believers. Moreover, it is necessary to point out that the positions of science and atheists are immensely strong in the USA. Even though atheists' numbers are not that impressive, they are concentrated in science; i.e., their quality overcomes quite successfully the masses' religious quantity. For example, among the members of the US National Academy of Sciences surveyed in 1998, only 7% called themselves believers.⁹ Note that American scientists clearly realize the importance of religion, as evidenced by the text of the resolution adopted by that Academy on 25 August 1981. It says, “Religion and science are separate and mutually exclusive realms of human thought whose presentation in the same context leads to misunderstanding of both scientific theory and religious belief.”¹⁰

Against the backdrop of this approach by the US National Academy of Sciences, the reasoning about religion by Charles Murray (of whose work I have made active use in this book) looks extremely incongruous. Again, I recall in this regard Lenin's summary, which boils down to this: bourgeois scientists are good at gathering facts but hopeless when they try to interpret the facts. Murray is a case in point. He gathered some unique information but made evaluations based on that information such as this: “The Dark Ages following the fall of Rome saw Europe sink back to technologies that were far more primitive than those used during the preceding millennium. The philosophical and literary foundations of Western civilization were forgotten for centuries. Many works were lost irretrievably.”¹¹ He had in mind not only the achievements of Greece and Rome, but also those of the preceding Sumerian, Egyptian, and Phoenician cultures. He did not neglect to mention the burning of the Alexandria library by Christians: in the first burning, 400,000 manuscripts perished; in the second 20 years later, another 200,000. Christian monks did not even spare Hypatia of Alexandria, an outstanding woman philosopher and mathematician who lived in the 4th century AD; they tore her to bits.

⁹ *Nature* [redacted]

¹⁰ *Press, Science and Creationism:* [redacted]

¹¹ Murray, [redacted]

Murray also wrote with approval, “But hardly any Romans actually believed that the gods were gods, any more than they believed that the dead emperors became gods. If one looks for a Roman true faith, astrology is a better candidate” (ibid., 31). In the successful development of science in China, he saw the influence of the Chinese people’s lack of religiosity.

Speaking of the USA in the 21st century, he asserts that the “middle and working classes” are religious while the great majority of the creative elite remains secular, moreover “aggressively” so. There is nothing good about that, however, since:

it is *harder* to find that purpose if one is an atheist or agnostic than if one is a believer. It is harder still to maintain attention to that purpose over years of effort. Devotion to a human cause, whether social justice, the environment, the search for truth, or an abstract humanism, is by its nature less compelling than devotion to God. Here, Christianity has its most potent advantage. The incentives of forgiveness of sin and eternal life are just about as powerful as incentives get. The nonbeliever has to make do with comparatively tepid alternatives. (ibid., 407–8)

I never understood, and I still do not understand, what this “sin” is that religion keeps droning on about. It likewise exceeds my understanding how a man whose work actually proves religion’s hostility to science could write the above passage. I cannot rule out that there exist some objective reasons for this that are tied to both politics and ideology. It is known, for example, that all members of the US Congress must be religious to be elected. It is also known that in some of the most prestigious universities, antireligious teachings, in particular historical materialism, are simply banned to this day. The French philosopher Lucien Sève showed this convincingly using the example of France’s most prestigious schools.¹²

However, the main cause would seem to be the crisis of the whole capitalist system. Capitalist values either cease to work or work toward self-destruction. In this situation, the ideologues believe that religion can be the life belt, for the dumbed-down population absorbs it more easily. Thus, it does retain some kind of historical future.

Religion still exists, albeit in a modernized form. Even the popes started asserting in the 20th century that religion and science are compatible. Even though they are antagonists in principle, certain parts of religious postulates do coincide with the needs of society’s life. At the same time, it is necessary to point out the following phenomenon: in everyday life, the majority of believers separate religious dogmas ultra-pragmatically and clearly from real life needs. While disagreeing, for example, with Darwin’s theory of evolution, they willingly make use of the fruits of science in life, especially of the achievements of medicine. For example, the Patriarch of Russia flew to Switzerland for treatment when he became ill, not relying on prayers.

It is necessary to note that those who consider themselves religious are not truly so since in real life, they violate practically all of Moses’ precepts and the Bible’s instructions – especially since the majority does not even know them.

Today’s religiosity in advanced countries is tied for the most part to tradition rather than to real belief in God. Nonetheless, it is notable that religiosity in the West, especially in the USA, has increased since the end of the 20th century. Moreover, President Bush, Jr. even started stimulating it. For this, there is also a logical explanation.

The thing is that Western societies started experiencing a system crisis involving disintegration of marriages, the spread of same-sex relationships, etc. This badly affected badly population growth rates and scales of birthrate in the West. In the advanced countries, the white population practically ceased growing; in some countries, it is even decreasing. Religion, though, has always supported the institution of marriage, as stated many times in both the Old and the New Testaments, and practice shows that fertility is higher in religious than in nonreligious families. Moreover, religion is opposed in its foundation to the perversions of same-sex love. Even though some “super-progressive” priests in the West are themselves perverts or encourage these phenomena, the majority of them are still opposed to homosexuality, hence the promotion of religious values – family values, in this case. Thus, in the age of science, certain elements of religion started revealing – strange as it may seem – their positive aspects from the perspective of the continuation of the human race. A favorable role is played, in particular, by the preaching of moderation in eating, of an ordered

¹² Sève, [REDACTED]

way of life (against the backdrop of total depravity), etc. These are all, however, details that are not the foundation of religion.

Strategically, religion is clearly a brake on science and is, therefore, objectively an opponent of life expectancy. Religion is one of the main allies of the law of entropy. It manifests these allied qualities in the following forms:

First, all religious postulates that have to do with the origin of the world and mankind are already false on the fundamental level. These postulates stimulate obscurantist thinking in the consciousness of the majority of inhabitants who combat science fiercely in everyday life (while making use, I repeat, of all its fruits).

Second, religion distracts hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people from socially useful lives. I refer specifically to the priests and all their service personnel whose activity can only be called parasitic. The maintenance of all these parasites is a waste of resources in any state.

Third, religion consumes colossal amounts of funds that are used up to build all sorts of temples and other such structures to please mythical gods and for the benefit of the priests. Over the centuries, millions of working people have been destroyed in the process of building pyramids, temples, and monasteries. However, in earlier centuries, all these construction projects in the name of myths could be excused by universal underdevelopment. In the present day, in the third millennium, the useless waste of human and monetary resources on the construction of churches and temples should be viewed as a crime against mankind.

Religion proved in practice that the more religion, the less science; accordingly, the less knowledge, ultimately the less progress.

Moreover, religion always means war. To put an end to wars, or at least to one variety – religious wars – it is necessary to declare war on religion, any kind of religion. Without defeating religion, there can be no peace in the world.