

The Catholic Advantage

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We all want to be healthy, happy, and make it to heaven; even atheists who do not believe in heaven would prefer they enter the pearly gates if given only two choices. Who are the most likely, and the least likely, to achieve the Three H's of health, happiness, and heaven is the subject of my new book.

The real challenge, I found, is not deciding who these people are—the data on the first two H's are uncontested (and there is little disagreement on the attributes that make us likely candidates for heaven)—the difficult part was explaining why some have a decided advantage over others. From scouring the evidence, it became clear that the Three B's—beliefs, bonds, and boundaries—were the key to achieving the Three H's.

Well-being is a term that describes our physical and mental health, our degree of happiness, and overall life evaluation. Those who have the highest well-being are the most religious; those who score the lowest are the least religious. This is not debatable. As for heaven, while only God knows for sure who will make the cut, it is entirely reasonable to maintain that those who are charitable and altruistic stand the best chance of being rewarded in the afterlife. We know from many studies that religious Americans are the most likely to engage in charitable giving and altruistic endeavors; agnostics and atheists are the least likely.

While the data on religious Americans is not confined to Catholicism, the evidence is particularly persuasive for Catholics. That is why I say there is a Catholic advantage vis-à-vis secularists: the degree to which we possess the beliefs, cherish the bonds, and respect the boundaries of right and wrong is significant. Indeed, we embody the Three B's as well as any religious community; this gives us a big

leg up in achieving the Three H's.

To make my argument, I selected practicing Catholics, priests, nuns (especially cloistered sisters), and saints as representative of the Catholic model. I chose Hollywood celebrities and intellectuals to represent the secular model. On the face of it, these two secular groups have little in common, but what unites them is their agnosticism and atheism: the former have no time for God, and the latter think they are smarter than God. On the whole, both suffer from poor physical and mental health, are largely unhappy, and are not exactly charitable or altruistic.

The first of the Three B's, beliefs, is an important variable explaining our physical and mental health. Patients who pray for relief of a specific medical condition usually find that their prayers have been answered. Indeed, frequent prayer is clearly related to physical and emotional well-being.

Intercessory prayer, or absent prayer, also yields important results. When people are asked to pray for a specific person, whom they do not know, but who is suffering from an illness, and the prayer recipient has no knowledge that this is happening, such patients improve better than those patients with the same condition but who did not have anyone praying for them. These "double blind" studies have been replicated many times.

The second B, bonds, is another advantage Catholics have. The word religion is derived from the Latin, *religare*, which means "to bind together." The opportunities that parish life provides in establishing bonds—retreats, parties, organized pastoral and political events—are plentiful. Moreover, these relationships are a great resource in time of need.

What do agnostics and atheists have to fall back on? For many of them, their beliefs are self-centered and their bonds are fragmented. It is not without consequence that celebrities are

known for their narcissism and intellectuals are famous for their egotism. Unfortunately, their radical individualism does not serve them well in achieving a stable and healthy existence, never mind attaining happiness.

Boundaries, the third B, are a critical element in determining our physical and mental health. Those who do not respect the need to use the brakes that God gave us are precisely the ones most likely to engage in risky behaviors; on this score, celebrities and intellectuals have no rival. By contrast, those who do not see constraint as a liability—cloistered nuns come quickly to mind—are among the healthiest and happiest people on earth.

Dr. Jeff Levin talks about an “epidemiology of love,” or what he says is our capacity to love God. Those who possess this attribute exercise greater self-mastery, and a greater sense of self-efficacy. They suffer less from depression and physical disabilities. In fact, the association of religion with physical health is so strong that those who are the most religious are also the least likely to suffer from cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, hypertension, asthma, back pain, tuberculosis, and other maladies. Moreover, in terms of mental health, the more religious the person is, the better his mental condition.

The “Nun Study,” a research project that studied 678 Catholic nuns aged 75-102 in 1991, found that ten years later 295 were still alive, ranging in age from 85 and older. They lived longer than women outside the convent, and were considerably happier. Cloistered nuns, the evidence shows, live on average eight years longer than other women.

Alcohol and drug use, promiscuity, and crime, are all inversely related to religiosity: the more religious a person is, the less likely he is to indulge in these behaviors. The obverse is also true: secular-minded persons, such as celebrities and intellectuals, are the most likely to partake

in these destructive acts. That's because religious Americans are more likely to exercise self-restraint, and the folks in Tinseltown and in higher education are more likely to be self-indulgent.

Our mental health is often a function of our connectedness, our ability to establish meaningful bonds. Loneliness, depression, and suicide are the sad results of an inability to connect. Barbra Streisand's famous refrain, "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world," didn't quite nail it. All of us need people—those of us who have people are the luckiest in the world.

Cloistered nuns, unlike celebrities, enjoy two benefits that their swinging counterparts do not have: they are strongly connected to each other and to God. This explains why they are healthier and happier than most of us. It is not the alcohol-using, drug-addicted, bed-hopping narcissists who are at peace with themselves. Just read the obituary pages.

Everyone experiences tough times, but we Catholics have a major advantage over secularists: we have the example of Jesus. His death, the greatest expression of love the world has ever known, was followed by his Resurrection, the greatest victory the world has ever known. This explains why we are an optimistic people: Catholicism understands suffering, but it remains confident that joy comes in its wake.

In particular, Catholics learn how to "offer it up." When going through a tough patch, we are able to unite our sufferings with Christ. This is the essence of redemptive suffering. For instance, the number of saints who endured great suffering are legion, but in the end they all knew the beauty and joy of being with the Lord. Sadly, the idea of redemptive suffering is wholly unknown to agnostics and atheists. In times of trial, they are left to themselves, having nowhere to turn.

No segment of society has a monopoly on happiness, but the data conclusively show that the happiest are also the most religious; the least likely to be happy are their secular opposites. It is not money that buys happiness—it is living a faithful life. Those who attend church regularly also feel freer than secularists, and feeling free is tied to happiness. The happiest professional group are priests: more than anything else, celebrating the Eucharist accounts for their inner peace.

Among the least happy are celebrities and intellectuals. Alcoholism, drug use, multiple partners, multiple divorces, loneliness, depression, and mental illness are not stereotypes born of exaggeration: these qualities are a staple among the Hollywood crowd and intellectuals. Their self-absorption and self-destructive tendencies account for their misery, to say nothing of what they do to others.

To take one example, the number of intellectuals who have abandoned their children, and have seriously mistreated those closest to them, is shocking. That they typically wrote endlessly about championing the needy, while neglecting their own, is one of the most telling commentaries about them.

At the other extreme are the saints. While their lives are a veritable road map to heaven, they were not always virtuous; many lived lives of debauchery. But when they embraced Jesus they became a model of love. Who do the atheists have to emulate? The saints gave of themselves willingly, and tirelessly. Mother Teresa said that if love is real, it must cost us. That is not something the self-centered understand.

Surveys show that the most generous Americans are the most religious, and that the least generous are the least religious. If you are looking to see charitableness in action, go to Utah or Alabama; don't waste your time visiting New England. Does this mean that conservatives are much more generous than liberals? Yes, the data show exactly that.

Frederick Ozanam personified charitableness. He was the founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. When his atheist debating associates challenged him on what he was doing personally for the poor, he answered the challenge by enlisting his friends to dedicate their lives to one-on-one personal care for the needy. This is the essence of the Catholic notion of self-giving.

Altruism is not easy to measure, but those who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust have properly been chosen as exemplars. The evidence shows that it wasn't the self-absorbed who put their lives on the line—they were the least likely—it was those who had a clear sense of right and wrong, and duty to others. Catholics were prominently among them.

Secular intellectuals are split on the idea of heaven: some scoff at it altogether while others hold that heaven on earth can be achieved. Their efforts to establish utopia, however, have all ended in bloodshed.

Beginning with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the intellectual architect of the French Revolution, the quest for the “new man”—human beings who are not self-interested—has yielded nothing but genocide. Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot were all visionaries who sought to create the “new man,” thus ushering in a utopian wonderland; similarly, Hitler thought he could reinstitute a new sense of community and rescue Western civilization.

All of these secular maniacs rejected original sin. That was their fatal flaw. They saw human nature as malleable, akin to putty: it could be shaped and reshaped at their will. So they thought. Heaven exists, but only in the afterlife.

All things considered, there really is a Catholic advantage. Exercising the Three B's—beliefs, bonds, and boundaries—is the surest way to achieve the Three H's of health, happiness, and

heaven. But they cannot be “adopted.” That’s because the Three H’s are a residual, the natural byproduct of living the life of a faithful Catholic. To say it pays sweet dividends cannot be argued, even by agnostics and atheists.