

Happiness is...

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the happiest of them all? Not the intellectuals, that's for sure. Indeed, they're probably the most miserable. But more on that later.

Certainly among the happiest are those who have happy marriages, and there is little doubt that, by and large, the happily married are those who take their religion seriously. Social science data clearly show that there is a strong relationship between adherents of traditional religion and good marriages. Conversely, those who adhere to more "progressive" religions tend to have the worst track record. And for reasons that will be explained, the most well-educated are disproportionately represented among the losers.

Providing the data for such conclusions is a splendid new book by two academics from the City University of New York, Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman. *One Nation Under God* is a book chock-full of interesting data on the status of religion in contemporary society. It is because the Census Bureau does not ask questions about religion that the Kosmin and Lachman study is so valuable: they provide us with data, in this case the results of a representative survey of 113,000 Americans, that are otherwise unavailable.

It is one thing to say that "the family that prays together stays together," quite another to read those words as a conclusion in a national survey. But that is exactly what Kosmin and Lachman found. "Happily married couples," they write, "are more likely than divorced couples to have had a religious wedding and to attend religious services regularly." As already indicated, they also found that those who prefer their religion lite, or choose abstinence, are the most likely to be single, separated and divorced. It is not for nothing that the highest divorce rate belongs to Unitarians, even outdoing their non-believing cousins. Importantly, Kosmin and

Lachman add, "the only significant underrepresentation of divorced people irrespective of gender is among Catholics."

The correlation between religion and marital stability is not hard to understand. Throughout history men and women have traditionally married out of duty, not love. Indeed love as the basis for marriage is one of history's oddities, so rare has it been. Men and women typically married when their fathers, or the eldest male in the kinship network, decreed it. Marriage was never the joining of two individuals, it was the joining together of two families, or two clans. The marriages lasted because they were built on a solid foundation, namely economic self-interest, duty, tradition (read: religion), and the coupling of two collectivities. Today's marriages are not born of such qualities.

It should be obvious that the social supports that have traditionally provided the adhesiveness to marriage have all but disappeared. To be sure, for many persons religion remains a strong force, and that explains why those who possess it do well in marriage. Religion is the glue that provides the bonding during times of discord. It affirms in many ways – spiritually, psychologically and socially – the commitment between husband and wife, providing a buffer to adversity. Put another way, it congeals. Without it, relationships fray more easily.

High rates of divorce tend to cluster among the well-educated, as well as among non-believers and those who are soft on religion. For example, Unitarians not only top the list among the divorced, they top out as the most well-educated religious group in the country (almost 50 percent have a college degree as contrasted to 20 percent in the Catholic community). In general, those religions that are the most accepting of the "progressive" trends in our culture, namely the Unitarian, Jewish (save the Orthodox), Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and the "New Age" crowd, have educational achievement rates and divorce rates that well exceed the national average.

The well-educated tend to strike out in marriage more than the rest of us because they are more likely to be drawn to those religions which have struck the greatest degree of accommodation with the culture. Looked at another way, higher education inclines toward a hypercritical perspective of traditional morality, and it is this that accounts for the overrepresentation of the cognoscenti among the ranks of the disaffected. For them, ceremony and tradition are for the unenlightened. What they crave is rationality, not spirituality. That is why their religions, assuming they have any at all, tend to be hollow. In this respect, college faculty are prototypical.

Academicians, and most especially those who teach in the humanities and social sciences, are loaded with agnostics, atheists and adherents to “progressive” religions. These savants have spent a great deal of time thinking in a social vacuum about abstract ideas that bear no relationship to reality. Come to think of it, so too have madmen, which explains why the academy has so much in common with the asylum. But at least the patients have an excuse.

It is skepticism – run rampant – that makes the well-educated so ill-disposed to religion. But there is a price to be paid by turning one’s back on God. Such persons fall victim to themselves, fixing their eyes not on the other-world, or on others, but on themselves. Indeed one of the most pronounced characteristics that historian Paul Johnson found in his study of prominent Western intellectuals was the high degree of self-absorption that they possessed. What is striking is the extent to which people like Rousseau and Marx have long championed the cause of the dispossessed while simultaneously treating their parents, siblings, spouses, and children like dirt. They can embrace the masses but not their family.

It is possible to love individuals, and to love God, but it is not possible to love mankind or humankind. Sadly, the intellectuals think that they can. That is why they write

endlessly about the masses, the proletariat, people of color, the oppressed, the peasants, and the like. But it is impossible to love an abstraction. It is father, mother, husband, wife, son, and daughter who connect us in our happiness, not faceless entities. The happiness that derives from love of God may be abstract, but it is personal nonetheless. There is nothing personal about an aggregate.

It would be wrong to suggest that to be well-educated is to be soft on religion. For starters, just think about Pope John Paul II. And it would be equally wrong to suggest that only the most traditional in their beliefs are capable of having good marriages. But having acknowledged as much, we are still left with the fact that those who ascribe to traditional beliefs and practices are the most likely to find themselves happily married. It is also true that those who have not been seduced by the superstitions of the academy stand a better chance of maintaining a happy marriage. Put it together – the interactions between religion and happiness, and education and religion – and what we have is a powerful commentary on what makes for the good life.

– *William A. Donohue*