

RELIGION AND INTELLIGENCE

It is an old story: “the premise that religious beliefs are irrational, not anchored in science, not testable and, therefore, unappealing to intelligent people who ‘know better.’”

While not specifically endorsing that pejorative description of religious belief, a piece that was published online last August by the Personality and Social Psychology Review uses “a meta-analysis of 63 studies” on the subject to posit “a reliable negative relation between intelligence and religiosity.”

That concluded, they proffer three possible explanations: atheism as nonconformity, the idea that “intelligent people are less likely to conform to religious orthodoxy”; cognitive style, the contention that intelligent people are more analytical (read “thoughtful”) while religious belief relies on “intuitive” thinking: “reflexive, spontaneous, mostly non-conscious”; and finally, functional equivalence, which holds that religion is primarily motivated “to satisfy needs,” such as a sense of personal (or compensatory) control, self-regulation, self-worth, and attachment (to avoid loneliness); and that “intelligence” also satisfies these needs, obviating the need for reliance on religion.

The authors base the “non-conformity” model on the dual assertions that “more intelligent people are less likely to conform,” and that “atheism can be characterized as non-conformity in the midst of religious majority.” But their model is too broad when they speak of “societies where the majority is religious.” People’s inclination to conformity is arguably better measured by how easily they conform within the smaller subcultures in which they live their everyday lives.

Consider, for example, two highly influential American

subcultures: secular college campuses and the entertainment world. In both, non-belief in religion—in many cases outright hostility toward religious belief—predominates. Within these subcultures, it is unquestionably those who profess religious belief, not those who reject it, who can be said to be the nonconformists; does that, in itself, make religious believers in those circles more intelligent than their non-believing counterparts?

The “functional equivalence” argument presupposes that religion is a man-made construct developed to fulfill certain human needs. That it may be of supernatural origin—i.e., that God may actually exist, and that He reveals His existence to us through the gift of human reason—must be summarily dismissed for this explanation to have any validity; and so, to adopt this explanation is to have begun with a bias against religious belief that undermines the analysis. Moreover, when the authors contend that “intelligence is associated with better self-regulation and self-control,” one need think only of the rampant hedonism and self-destructive behavior of so many of the self-absorbed—and anti-religion—Hollywood set, to see the holes in such a generalized linkage of atheism to higher intelligence.

That leaves us with the “cognitive style” argument, which is difficult to quantify. There is, first, the question of which testing approaches best measure such “intelligence.” The Personality and Social Psychology Review piece dismisses grade point averages (GPA) in favor of “widely used” and detailed intelligence tests. MIT Sloane Professor Shane Frederick, however, maintains that his three-question Cognitive Reflection Test “predicts such characteristics as well as and sometimes better than much longer cognitive tests.” So which is more effective, especially when applying such general cognitive results to specific questions such as the relationship of intelligence to religious belief?

Then there is the level of objectivity of the

researchers—those who develop such tests, those who interpret them, and those who apply them to sociological questions like the one being addressed here. The authors acknowledge the existence of “majority atheist subcultures,” listing “scientists” as one. As we have just discussed, secular academia—from where these studies emanate—is another. Is it wise to expect an objective analysis of the relationship between intelligence and religion from those in a “high intelligence” profession dominated by atheist thinking?

Wiser, it would seem, to apply a healthy dose of skepticism toward the assertion of a disconnect between religion and intelligence, put forth by researchers whose intellectual conformity predisposes them to reach such a conclusion.