

# THE GREAT NATIONAL RESOURCE — RELIGION

by Russell Shaw

Is religion a national asset? George Washington certainly thought so.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports...firmest props of the duties of men and citizens,” Washington famously declared in his presidential farewell address in 1796.

Lately, though, what looked so clear to Washington has not necessarily been clear to everybody else. Court tests and community squabbles over religion’s role in the public square—in fact, over whether it has a role—have been regular features of American life for decades.

In his book “The Culture of Disbelief” published in 1994, Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter worried about “a trend in our political and legal cultures toward treating religious beliefs as arbitrary and unimportant.”

Indeed, Carter added, “more and more, our culture seems to take the positions that believing deeply in the tenets of one’s faith represents...something that thoughtful, public-spirited American citizens would do well to avoid.”

That would be a serious mistake, a new social-science report contends. For not only are religious belief and practice good for individuals—they are very good for society. The report by Patrick F. Fagan, a policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, states:

“The evidence indicates strongly that it is good social policy

to foster the widespread practice of religion. It is bad social policy to block it.

“The widespread practice of religious beliefs is one of America’s greatest national resources. It strengthens individuals, families, communities and society as a whole. It significantly affects educational and job attainment and reduces the incidence of such major social problems as out-of-wedlock births, drug and alcohol addiction, crime and delinquency.

“No other dimension of the nation’s life, other than the health of the family (which the data show also is tied powerfully to religious practice) should be of more concern to those who guide the future course of the United States.”

Fagan, a deputy undersecretary of the Department of Health and Human Services responsible for family policy in the Bush administration, set out these conclusions in “Why Religion Matters,” a report reviewing social-science studies of the impact of religion on individual behavior and social life in the United States.

Even in the face of assaults from secularizing forces, the report points out, religious belief and practice remain at unusually high levels in this country. More than half of Americans go to church every week. Surveys find that 94 percent of blacks, 91 percent of women, 87 percent of whites and 85 percent of men say they pray regularly. Even among agnostics and atheists—about 13 percent of the total population—some 20 percent report that they pray every day.

And, according to Fagan, the results are highly beneficial.

- Churchgoers are more likely to be married, less likely to be divorced, and more likely to manifest a high degree of marital satisfaction. Church attendance is the most important predictor of marital stability and

happiness.

- Regular religious practice also is associated with successful efforts by inner-city youth to escape poverty.
- To a considerable degree, church-going “inoculates” people against personal and social ills such as suicide, drug abuse, out-of-wedlock births and crime. It also helps people overcome problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction and marital breakdown.
- Religious practice also is associated with such mental-health benefits as less depression and higher self-esteem.
- The data even show regular practice of religion to be associated with physical health—increased longevity, improved chances of recovery from illness and reduced incidence of many serious diseases.

One study, published in 1982 by Dr. Robert B. Byrd, a cardiologist at the medical school of the University of California in San Francisco, found measurable benefits in prayer—not just prayer by, but prayer for, patients who underwent cardiac surgery.

“None of the patients knew they were being prayed for, none of the attending doctors and nurses knew who was being prayed for and who was not, and those praying had no personal contact with the patients before or during the experiments,” Fagan’s report stated.

“Outcomes for the two sets of patients differed significantly: those prayed for had noticeably fewer post-operative congestive heart failures, fewer cardiopulmonary arrests, less pneumonia and less need for antibiotics.”

Up to now, the prayer study apparently is one of a kind in the

social-science realm. But there are many other studies showing positive affects of religion on behavioral and social problems, such as illegitimacy, crime, delinquency and other social ills.

Not all religious practice is benign. Fagan's report calls attention to the social-science distinction between religious practice that is "intrinsic"—"God-oriented and based on beliefs which transcend the person's own existence"—and "extrinsic" practice, described as "self-oriented and characterized by outward observance." The former is beneficial, the latter is not.

Assuming religious practice to be of the benign sort, though, Fagan found it to be, for example, "one of the most powerful of all factors in preventing out-of-wedlock births."

"Nearly without exception, religious practice sharply reduces the incidence of pre-marital intercourse," he said. But the reverse also is true: "The absence of religious practice accompanies sexual permissiveness and premarital sex."

Parallel effects also have been found among young inner-city black males. According to one study, church attendance is positively linked to "substantial differences" in their behavior as compared with the behavior of non-attending youth and also to their chances of escaping inner-city poverty.

In light of such findings, Fagan offered a number of suggestions for policy-makers and officials to encourage religious practice in appropriate ways.

- Congress should initiate "a new national debate" on the role of religion in American life, should ask the General Accounting Office to review the evidence in this matter and present its findings to a new national commission, and should fund federal experiments in school choice, including

religiously sponsored schools.

- The president should appoint federal judges who are “more sensitive to the role of religion in public life” and should join Congress in directing the Census Bureau to include religious practice in the 2000 census. Instructing federal agencies to cooperate with church-sponsored social, medical, and educational services is not against separation of church and state.
- The Supreme Court should review its church-state rulings for hostility to religion and should let Congress handle church-state matters that belong with the legislative branch rather than the courts.

Fagan also called on religious leaders to be “much more assertive” in emphasizing the contribution of religion to national health and in resisting efforts to “minimize religion in the public discourse.”

Recognizing the role of religion in solving inner-city poverty and other problems, he said, church people should urge educators, social scientists and social-policy practitioners to “rely more on religious belief and worship to achieve social policy and social-work goals.”

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