

Social virtues linked to faith

Decline in religion may bring decline in civility, study warns

Charles Lewis, National Post

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A new Canadian survey has found that believers are more likely than atheists to place a higher value on love, patience and friendship, in findings the researcher says could be a warning that Canadians need a religious basis to retain civility in society.

The survey of 1,600 Canadian adults, led by University of Lethbridge professor Reginald Bibby, gave a list of 12 values -- from honesty to family life to politeness to generosity -- and asked the participants if they found each "very important." In each case, theists ranked the values as more important than atheists.

The reason for this, suggests Prof. Bibby, a prominent sociologist, is that those who are involved with religious groups are being exposed to a whole range of values that are not being propagated well by any other major source. "To the extent that people are not involved in religious groups ... they're not being exposed to those interpersonal values and they're simply not holding them as strongly," Prof. Bibby said in an interview.

The study says: "To the extent that Canadians are saying good-bye to God, we may find that we pay a significant social price."

He said people who are believers are encouraged -- whether by a desire to please God, or because of a fear of God -- to adopt these values. "If you don't have that as a major source in the culture then what will be the source? I think that's where we've been really superficial ... we've really been underestimating the contribution religious groups can make." Prof. Bibby describes himself as a believer in God who holds many of the values that the theists in his survey value. But he has no particular religious identity beyond saying he is a Protestant and describes his own family as being secularized. He acknowledged that many non-believers still place a high value on morality and ethics. But he said some of that is a legacy from previous generations who held deeper religious views.

In many families, he said, Grandma is the "symbolic saintly person in the clan."

"So valuing Grandma also means valuing many of the things important to her. In successive generations you have a lingering effect of morality. But further down the road generations get further removed from the sources of those values. That's where it gets tricky."

In the survey findings, there was only a five percent-age-point difference between how theists and atheists valued honesty. But of all the categories, honesty is the value that is least connected to broad emotions such as love and compassion. In other words, someone can be honest and

brutal. But in the realm of forgiveness, which is a core value of many major religions, particularly Christianity, the difference -- 32 percentage points -- is stark.

"That's a pretty explicit value within a large number of religious communities," said Prof. Bibby. "Look at the culture as a whole and ask yourself: To what extent do we value forgiveness against themes like zero-tolerance? We don't talk very much about what we're going to do for people who fall through the cracks. So I think forgiveness is pretty foreign to a lot of people if they're not involved in religious groups."

The study says that believers will not always translate their views into action but "at least they are inclined to hold the values" and that atheists "do not have as many explicit support groups that are committed to intentionally promoting [a] positive interpersonal life."

Religious philosopher and writer C.S. Lewis believed that the inner call to be good comes from a higher power that speaks to conscience. But atheists such as Richard Dawkins, author of the recent best-seller *The God Delusion*, reject that idea as nonsense and look to evolution as the author of morality. Prof. Dawkins believes morality comes through the altruism gene or the "selfish gene" and it is to everyone's benefit and survival that we behave civilly with one another. Among family members, it is a way to protect our own gene pool. "[A]nimals tend to care for, defend, share resources with, warn of danger, or otherwise show altruism towards close kin because of the statistical likelihood that kin will share copies of the same genes," Prof. Dawkins wrote.

Justin Trottier, executive director of the Centre for Inquiry Ontario, a Toronto-based atheist group, thinks the problem with Prof. Bibby's survey is with the definition of values. He said the categories in the survey fit in the mould of the Ten Commandments, so a religious person's enthusiastic response to them is not surprising.

"To me, scientific thinking is a value. Critical thinking is a value. Open inquiry is my biggest value," said Mr. Trottier. "If he made those values -- the way atheists would -- he would have gotten different responses."



He said that people should be judged by their actions, not by how they respond to survey questions. A person can claim to be any number of things but the proof is in the pudding. He said his own group, for example, has a sobriety support group, and that many nations that are highly secular do a better job of taking care of their poor than religious ones.

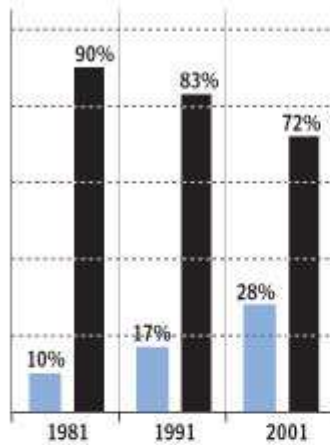
"Religion tends to be very polarizing, so religious people always feel very passionately about those values. They always feel 'very strongly.' Religion always does this black-and-white thing. An atheist is a lot more temperate, a bit more hesitant. An atheist might be more nuanced in his or her thinking."

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RELIGIOUS RIGHT

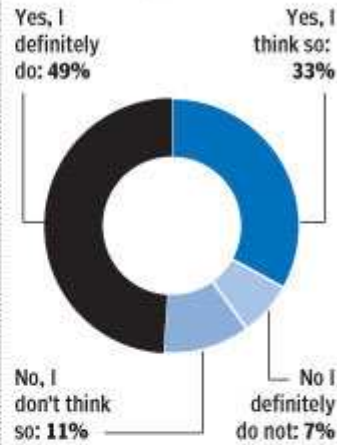
Q. What is your religion?

Catholic or Protestant 
 No religion or other 
 PERCENTAGE



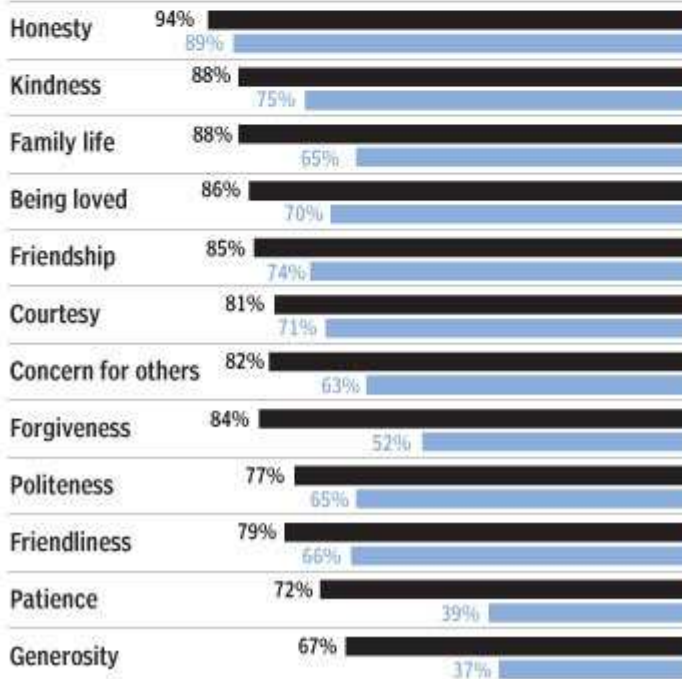
Q. Do you believe God or a higher power exists?

PERCENTAGE



Q. Which on the list below are very important virtues

Those who believe in God  Those who don't 
 PERCENTAGE



SOURCES: REGINALD W. BIBBY, PROJECT CANADA SURVEY AND STATSCAN

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