



The Editor

Thriving without God

IN his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* Edmund Burke argued that “man is by his constitution, a religious animal”. Religion, he said, is the ‘source of all good’ and ‘the basis of civil society’. Voltaire, although a Deist and a supporter of the separation of church and state, agreed, famously remarking that “if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him”. Believers often repeat these arguments today and suggest that if people ‘turn away from God’, then crime will shoot up, corruption will increase, promiscuity will rise and depression and suicide will escalate.

It is all nonsense, of course, and there is much evidence in favour of secularism. According to Dr Phil Zuckerman, Professor of Sociology at Pitzer College, California, in *Psychology Today*, (13th October), those democratic states today that are the most secular, such as Scandinavia, Japan, Australia and the Netherlands, are faring much better on nearly every single indicator of well-being imaginable than the most religious states on earth, such as Colombia, Jamaica, El Salvador, Yemen, Malawi, Pakistan and the Philippines.

Consider some specific examples. The Save the Children Foundation publishes an annual **Mother’s Index**, wherein it ranks the best and worst places on earth in which to be a mother. And the best are almost always the most secular states, while the worst are among the most devout.

The Institute for Economics and Peace publishes an annual **Global Peace Index** and, according to its 2014 rankings, the most peaceful states on earth, such as Iceland, Denmark, Austria and Finland are almost all among the most secular, while the least peaceful, such as Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan are among the most religious. Largely secular Europe, with 14 of the top 20 most peaceful nations, is the world’s most peaceful region.

Murder rates are lower in more secular countries and higher in more

religious nations where belief in God is widespread. Of the top 50 safest cities in the world, nearly all are in relatively non-religious countries. Denmark and Sweden, “probably the least religious countries in the world, and possibly in the history of the world”, enjoy “among the lowest violent crime rates in the world [and] the lowest levels of corruption in the world”.

According to the OECD, the states in the USA with the worst **quality of life** tend to be among the most religious, such as Mississippi and Alabama, while those states with the best quality of life tend to be among the least religious, such as Vermont and New Hampshire. According to Zuckerman’s research, murder rates are also lowest in more



secular states, such as Vermont and Oregon, and highest in the most religious, such as Louisiana and Alabama. He also points out that atheists are very much under-represented in the American **prison population** at only 0.2% and have a lower **divorce rate** than believers.

Zuckerman also indicates that secular nations such as those in Scandinavia display greater **altruism**, donating the highest percentage of income and supportive aid per capita to poorer nations. Two studies show that, during the Holocaust, “the more secular people were, the more likely they were to rescue and help persecuted Jews”.

Indeed, in terms of **outlook and values** generally, numerous studies

demonstrate that atheists and agnostics, when compared to religious people, are less likely to be nationalistic, racist, anti-Semitic, dogmatic, ethnocentric, and authoritarian. Secularism also correlates to higher education levels and to support for women’s rights and gender equality, as well as gay and lesbian rights. Religious people are more likely to support government use of torture.

In 2009 the *Evolutionary Psychology Journal* carried out a study of the correlation between religious belief and **contentment and security**. It found that the less religious a society is, the happier and more secure it becomes. Religion flourishes where a society is dysfunctional and poor. When affluence is present and people feel secure through the provision of health care and social services, religion quickly loses its hold. Gregory Paul, the author of the study, writes: “Popular religion is a coping mechanism for the anxieties of a dysfunctional social and economic environment”. People, he says, then depend on the supernatural entities that could be petitioned for aid and protection. Various world **happiness** studies back up Paul’s findings, with Denmark, Norway, Netherlands and Sweden at or near the top of most lists (a 2013 OECD report put Ireland 15th). People who say they are religious in these four countries are low at between 31% and 34%.

Believers crow that atheists and agnostics are unhappier than they are, but research indicates that we are often made unhappy by the oppressive and intolerant nature of the religious society in which we live, whereas believers are made welcome in more secular states and are therefore happier. So, if we are unhappy, it’s their fault for making us so!

Christians, Muslims and other faith groups should take note of these findings. Millions of people throughout the world are good and thriving without God and we are growing every day. Imagine there’s no heaven. It is easy if you try. □