Is religion “dangerous” and associated with dysfunctionality, misery, and bigotry (as the new atheists have argued) or is it associated with health, joy, and altruism? I know, I know—in various times and places it has been associated with both; religion comes in both healthy and toxic forms. But on balance, is religious engagement more strongly associated with human degradation or human flourishing?

I have been fascinated of late by two striking and paradoxical findings: religiosity is negatively correlated with well-being across populations, and positively correlated across individuals. I have observed this repeatedly, in different data sets with different well-being measures.

Perhaps the most striking example comes from harvesting new Gallup survey data from the first-ever survey of the entire human populations (some 350,000 people in 152 countries). As the adjacent figure illustrates, countries where most people say that religion is not an important part of their daily life and where most people have not attended religious services in the last week, tend to be countries where people report high quality of life.

In *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists* I also compare state populations. The Southern states all have higher religious-adherence rates than do the West Coast states. They also have slightly higher divorce rates, and much higher crime, teen birth, and smoking rates. So, by some measures, it again looks like the least religious places are the healthiest and most civil.
States and countries vary in many ways, including not only religiosity but also literacy and education, culture and ethnicity, and income and financial security. My psychologist friend Ed Diener, who has noticed the same negative religiosity-well-being correlation across populations, tells me it disappears when controlling for income. The Princeton economist Angus Deaton is also mining the Gallup data, and similarly finds that the cross-country correlation essentially vanishes when controlling for education.

Moreover, the great irony is that the correlation reverses when computed across individuals. Religiously engaged individuals tend to be happier, healthier, more generous, less crime-prone, and less often involved with premature sexuality and pregnancy.

Consider happiness. "Religious people have higher life satisfaction in most every nation," Diener tells me. So it is in the countries for which I have examined data, as dramatically evident in the National Opinion Research Center’s surveys of 47,909 Americans (see figure).

Likewise, the most religiously engaged Americans have been half as likely as never-attenders to be divorced and about one-fourth as likely to smoke or been arrested (despite highly religious states have substantially higher divorce, smoking, and arrest rates).

These data—and additional positive correlations between religious engagement and health, generosity, and volunteerism—do not validate religion. But they do, methinks, challenge the anecdote-fueled new atheist argument that religion is an overriding force for evil (a point also made by Bruce Sheiman’s recent book, An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity is Better Off with Religion Than Without It.) That said, it remains for people at a higher analytical pay grade than mine to sort through the ironic findings that population secularity and individual religiosity predict human flourishing.

Hope College social psychologist David Myers would be happy to share additional findings via e-mail, and to welcome advice and comment. ~