

Compassionate Humanism: Closing the Giving Gap

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Imagine you've designed an experiment to find out how to motivate people to give more to charity. One group attends a weekly inspirational talk. They hear about the needs of those less fortunate and are urged to rise to the highest aspirations of their worldview by meeting that need. Then a shiny plate is passed, full of the generous donations of their friends and neighbors. Each person makes a choice—add to that plate, or pass it on without contributing, fifty-two times a year.

A control group attends no such meetings. They give to causes they learn about and care about, but it's less systematic, less closely tied to a community expression of shared values.

Run the experiment for a year, then try to contain your surprise when the first group turns out to have given 2-3 times as much as the second. You probably wouldn't conclude that the first group is filled with more virtuous people. Instead, you'd realize that you'd created an effective giving culture—one that is systematic, personally aspirational, and tied to a community of shared values.

Of course this experiment has been going on for centuries. Churches have created a giving culture so effective that most religious adherents see charitable giving as a direct expression of their worldview. So it's not surprising that such solid instruments as the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census, the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, and studies by Independent Sector and the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University all show that the average churchgoer gives away 2-3 times more discretionary income than the average non-churchgoer. Given the different giving contexts, I'd be surprised if that *wasn't* true.

Conservative commentators including Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute claim that the difference is evidence of a "gap in virtue" between the groups. Churchgoers are just better people. But it's telling that we're talking not about belief but the measurable activity of churchgoing—the act of putting yourself in that giving context. I was a churchgoing atheist for over 20 years, and when I stopped going to church, my charitable giving fell off a cliff. It's not that I suddenly became less generous, just that my generosity was being tapped much less often and less effectively.

Nonreligious commentators sometimes counter that church giving shouldn't "count" since most of it stays in the church. True, it does—but that's irrelevant to this question. Even if the plates were emptied into a hole out back every week, it's still the case that individuals are giving more than they would have if they'd stayed home on Sundays, a habit that spills over into the rest of the week as well. And despite the temptation to simplify the

motivations for church giving to fear of hell or hope of salvation, the social psychology of it is far more down-to-earth, and therefore more adaptable to the world outside the church doors.

So once we get past the finger-pointing and back-patting about the giving gap, we can finally get to a worthwhile question: Can we create an equally effective systematic giving culture among the nonreligious? Without the church absorbing the lion's share, I could make an even bigger impact on genuine human need than I did when I was feeding that shiny plate.

This is a challenge and an opportunity for philanthropy. Church attendance in the U.S. has been dropping steadily since the 1990s, and fewer than one in four Americans now attend on a regular basis.¹ Even those of us who consider this good news for the culture should see that there are some things churches have done really well. If creating a giving culture is one of them, and people are exiting that system in droves, it's worth asking whether and how we can create it without the religious context.

To answer that question, in early 2010, I worked with several other atheists and humanists who had seen the same challenge to create a systematic giving program for those who share our worldview. The result is Foundation Beyond Belief, a charitable organization with a humanist identity that features five carefully selected charities per quarter working in areas including poverty, education, and human rights. Members sign up for an automatic monthly donation in the amount of their choice and distribute their funds however they wish among the charities. We spend each quarter telling the stories of these organizations and connecting their work to the humanist imperatives of mutual care and responsibility. We keep none of the funds designated for our featured charities; our own operations are funded through separate donations and grants.

The results so far have been very encouraging. The Foundation has over a thousand contributing members and is approaching a million dollars in total giving since the launch. Many members report a deeper connection with humanism and with human needs, and many have reported that they are now giving 2-3 times more per year than before they joined.

So that giving gap is real, but it's not about virtue, and closing it is a win for philanthropy and for the people whose lives are made better by it. As more and more people leave the churches, there will be more questions like this one, more opportunities to hit pause on the culture war and learn what we can from the things religion has done well—even as we set the rest of it aside.

¹ Hadaway, C. Kirk and Penny Long Marler. 2005. "How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week? An Alternative Approach to Measurement." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44:307-322.