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What's so Darned Special about Church Friends?

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One purpose of my recent research (with David E. Campbell) on religion in America[1] was to confirm and, if possible, extend previous research on the correlation of religiosity and altruistic behavior, such as giving, volunteering, and community involvement. It proved straight-forward to show that each of several dozen measures of good neighborliness was strongly correlated with religious involvement.

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Religious Americans (regular church-goers, for example) give more to charity (including to secular charities), volunteer much more (including for secular causes), work more often to solve a community problem or press for local reform, join and lead community organizations more frequently, and are more likely to give blood, or return excess change to a shop clerk, or offer a seat to a stranger, or even allow a stranger to cut in front of them. Notably, the greater altruism of religious people extends well beyond co-religionists to the wider community.

Moreover, this correlation remains strong even with stringent controls for possible confounding variables—race, gender, income, education, marital and parental status, age, length of residence, personal sociability, political ideology, and so forth. And the differences in outcome are not small: compared to matched Americans in the bottom quartile of religiosity, Americans in the top quartile are two to three times more likely to engage in altruistic behaviors. The proposition that these correlations actually reflect causation became even more plausible when we deployed a three-wave (2006-2007-2011) panel survey, examining patterns of change in religiosity and in altruistic behavior. People who became more religious tended to become "nicer," while the reverse was not nearly so true. "Causation" is notoriously hard to prove, but within the limits of non-experimental research, something about religiosity seems to "cause" people to behave in a more altruistic fashion.

When we turned to explore *why* religious people became nicer, however, the plot thickened. Once we controlled for the simple frequency of church attendance (or more formally, attendance at religious services), nothing else seemed to matter. Denomination or religious tradition mattered very little, nor did intensity of belief in God or heaven or hell, nor the importance of religion in one's daily life, nor having a personal relationship with God, nor frequency of private religious observance, nor any of several dozen other measures of the theological or psychological dimensions of religion. It was only when we turned to measures of involvement in one's own religious congregation that the explanatory fog began to clear, for people with more close friends at church, or more involvement in small groups at church, or more discussion of religion with friends and family—what we generically termed "church friends"—were systematically more altruistic than other Americans. Moreover, this strong correlation between altruism and church friends persists robustly even under stringent controls for other factors—including the respondent's number of close friends in general. Having more friends is associated with altruism, but church friends matter a lot, even beyond that fact; church friends seem super-charged.

In short, virtually the entire pattern of correlations between altruism and religiosity could be reduced parsimoniously to the impact of church friends. Once we took church friends into account, nothing else seemed to matter—not belief in God nor personal devotion nor church attendance.

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[1]Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, paperback edition with epilogue (Simon & Schuster, 2012). See that source for detailed documentation and citations supporting the generalizations in this essay.

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In other words, devout people who sit alone in the church pews are not more neighborly than atheists who never attend church, and conversely, atheists with friends at church (acquired, perhaps, by attending church suppers with one's more observant spouse) were fully as nice as the most religious person in the room. And once again, our panel studies strongly suggested that the connection between altruistic behavior and involvement in religiously-based social networks—having "church friends"—was actually causal: After acquiring a new church friend, you tend to become more neighborly, and losing a church friend seems to presage less generosity. Something about "church friends" seems to produce altruistic behavior.

Meanwhile, another part of our research team was working on a parallel, seemingly unrelated problem: why religion seems to be associated with subjective well-being or "happiness." To our astonishment, this second, independent inquiry arrived at almost precisely the same conclusion about the importance of church friends: something about religion seems to cause people to become more satisfied with their lives, and that "something" turned out to be church friends.[2] Even though "happiness" itself is far from synonymous with altruistic behavior, its religious roots were virtually identical. Controlling for theology, church attendance, general sociability, and other demographic factors, gaining friends at church seems to make you both happier and nicer, and losing friends at church seems to have the opposite effects. Church friends produce happier, nicer people.

Could this striking pattern somehow be attributable to some bizarre peculiarity of our Faith Matters survey, which on all standard measures seemed to be of exceptionally high quality and nationally representative? Other members of our team went looking for other nationally representative surveys that included all the necessary measures, including most critically, measures of church friends. To our delight we found that the Panel Study of Religion and Ethnicity (PALS), directed by Michael O. Emerson and David Sikkink, fit the bill, and in a forthcoming paper we report that drawing on that survey, we were able to replicate our initial findings about church friends and altruistic behavior in all essential respects.[3]

In short, church friends seem, almost uniquely, to elicit the better angels of our nature. We don't know for sure whether a close, morally intense secular social network could have a similar impact on altruistic behavior, but we haven't found any such examples yet. The power of church friends, our data show, is more than the sum of being religious and having friends.

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[2]Chaeyoon Lim and Robert D. Putnam, "Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction," American Sociological Review, vol. 75, n. 6 (December 2010): 914-933. In one respect the pattern for happiness is slightly different from the pattern for altruistic behavior, for the happiness effect of church friends turns out to be concentrated among people for whom religion is an important part of their personal identity.

[3]Valerie Lewis, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, "Religion, Networks, and Neighborliness: The Impact of Religious Social Networks on Civic Engagement," forthcoming.

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So what's so darned special about church friends? We don't yet know, and we invite other experts on altruistic behavior to join us in finding out why. Here, to kick-start the conversation, are several possible explanations.

- Maybe we encounter church friends more often—at least once a week for regular church-goers. But if that is the explanation, then work friends should be even more powerful, and the evidence is pretty strong that they are not.
- Maybe church friends are more likely to ask us to do good deeds. (Preliminary analyses hint that being asked is part of the story, but only part.)
- Maybe we are more likely to accede to such requests when they come from church friends. But that would still leave the question "why is that?" Perhaps religious friendships feel more morally freighted than secular friendships.
- Maybe we have shared more emotionally charged moments with church friends—birth, death, marriage, and so forth.
- Maybe religious friends more often discuss morality and obligation than secular friends, so perhaps hanging out with religious friends gradually raises the salience of moral behavior.
- Maybe church groups encourage a kind of gentle competition in beneficence. Just as the best bowler on a team wins the highest status, perhaps church friends are engaged in a genteel competition for recognition as the "nicest" in the group.

We don't know yet why religious friends are so special, but our research strongly suggests that solving that puzzle would be an important step toward understanding altruistic behavior, even in a purely secular context.