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## Religion and Philanthropy: How Does a Place of Worship Really Benefit the Public?

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Most people (in their pre-pandemic travels) would likely pass by at least one place of worship every day. As they did, many probably gave no thought to the building or to religion. “I don’t go there,” they might think, “so what does that place have to do with me?”

Some might not even notice the building because religion is simply not part of their lives. Others might see a church as a quaint relic from the past and feel a bit nostalgic. Some might see a mosque, temple, or synagogue as evidence of our multicultural society and feel good about that. And, no doubt, some might dismiss a place of worship as a private club that benefits only its members in some mysterious way.

Given that more and more Canadians say they are not religious, such responses are not surprising. A non-religious person might naturally believe that religion has nothing to do with them. But is this the case? Or might religion provide benefits that reach beyond the religious?

As registered charities, places of worship do not have to benefit *everyone* to be charitable, just a sufficiently large enough portion of the public. But, as such a significant part of the charitable sector, is it possible to show that religion does benefit everyone – the religious and the non-religious alike?

Spiritual benefits alone will not prove the point because the non-religious would have to agree they benefit from religion too, and for that to happen, there must be some non-spiritual benefits that the non-religious value. Wondering if the non-religious do benefit from religion too, I set out to discover how far the benefits of religion flow.

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My research (Pellowe, 2020) found a vast amount of government statistics and academic research, spreading across many disciplines and spanning up to five decades, proving the public benefits of religion for both the religious and non-religious. Studies in the fields of medicine, education, poverty, economics, family studies, sociology, psychology, and urban planning all found tangible, measurable benefits flowing from religion. Those studies have been replicated over the decades, showing that the benefits found in the 1970s compare to the benefits found today.

But there is a cloud over the good news: the percentage of the population that is religious is declining. The spiritual and temporal benefits of religion remain as powerful as ever for religious people, but the temporal benefits for the public, while still existing, are being diluted. Regardless, based on Canadian research, every Canadian enjoys four benefits because of religion.

First, religion promotes prosocial attitudes and behaviours. People who attend a place of worship at least once per week (the “Very Committed”) put a distinctively high value on the importance and quality of their relationships with others. Compared with the non-religious, they place more value on a sense of belonging, friendliness, and kindness. They are more likely to stress the importance of forgiveness, generosity, and concern for others (Bowen, 2004). Based on Statistics Canada data, Canadian sociologist Kurt Bowen wrote, “Though various secular moralities can and do preach the same virtues, it is the overwhelming Christian ranks of the Very Committed who most frequently and consistently endorse that ethic of forgiveness and concern for others” (Bowen, 2004, p. 283). It should be noted that most Canadian research, due to our demographics, relates to the Christian faith. That will undoubtedly change as other faiths continue to grow.

It is not necessary to be religious to be prosocial. A non-religious person could be more prosocial than a religious person, but, as a group, the Very Committed are far more likely to have prosocial attitudes and behaviours than non-religious people would as a group. Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby puts it this way: “People who don’t believe in God can be good. But people who believe in God are more likely to value being good, enhancing the chances that they will be good” (Bibby, 2007, p. 1).

As a nation, we aspire to have a society that every person experiences as being filled with gentleness, kindness, and civility towards all people (even those outside their own group), with everyone caring for the welfare of others. Although we are all imperfect in some way, places of worship work hard to instill these behaviours in their adherents. Without the influence of religion, Kurt Bowen wrote that “our civility is threatened” (2004, p. 288).

The second benefit of religion is an example of the prosocial attitudes and behaviours of the Very Committed. They are far more generous than the average Canadian in their giving and volunteering. The Very Committed volunteer and give with the same motivations as the non-religious: both groups embrace altruistic and humanitarian reasons for giving and volunteering. Where they differ is that the Very Committed have a basic life orientation to community and concern for the welfare of others. They tend to plan their giving in advance as a percentage of income. Their abundant generosity holds true for every income and educational level. At the lowest levels, the Very Committed give ten times more than the non-religious and, at the highest levels, they still give five times more (Bowen, 2004). Researchers the world over have observed the connection between religiosity and philanthropy in many studies, including one that was an

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extensive review of more than 550 different studies on the relationship between them (Pellowe, 2020, pp. 51-52).

One might think that religious people give just to their own religious charities, and thus the benefit of their giving and volunteering is not a public benefit beyond the religious community. However, this is not the case. Canadian social surveys reveal that the Very Committed give more to secular charities than do the non-religious. The median donation to a secular charity by the Very Committed is almost double that of the non-religious. And the same trend holds true for volunteering as well. The Very Committed give almost double the volunteer hours per year than the hours given by the non-religious, and a greater percentage of the Very Committed volunteer for secular charities than do the non-religious (Bowen, 2004, p. 180). Every Canadian benefits from the generosity of the Very Committed because their giving puts a strong safety net in place that any Canadian might need to use some day.

The third major public benefit from religion comes from the place of worship itself, as opposed to its members. Places of worship provide tangible and intangible benefits to their local communities. A question that churches have asked for a couple of decades now is, "If our church closed today, would anyone except us notice?"

"No" is the wrong answer! Churches are animated by their desire to be a blessing to their surrounding community. I have no reason to doubt that other religious places of worship would be the same.

A 2006 Imagine Canada report rebuts the idea that places of worship benefit only their own members, noting the contributions made by religious organizations (places of worship) to their local communities. It stated: "Perhaps contrary to expectation, religious organizations tend to serve the public, regardless of faith. Religious organizations are less likely than nonprofit and voluntary organizations in general to have membership restrictions or to serve a specific segment of the population" (Brownlee et al., 2006). A study of 46 Ontario churches supports Imagine Canada's findings. It concluded that non-members were four times more likely to use a church's community programmes than the church members were (Handy and Cnaan, 2000).

Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist at Boston University, studied congregational life in the United States and found a whole list of ways congregations contribute to their communities. She observed that "the largest proportion of congregational energy goes into providing relief for people in need, but nearly as much is directed at the education and self-improvement of others who may be less immediately needy" (Ammerman, 2001, p. 12). Places of worship exist to serve those who are not part of the congregation. Every Canadian can enjoy the programming that places of worship provide to improve community and family life.

The fourth and final public benefit is economic. Places of worship are highly efficient organizations that do all their good deeds with a minimum investment. Always short of money in comparison to their aspirations, they get an extraordinary amount done by enlisting volunteers and stretching every dollar as far as they can. They end up producing value well beyond what their budgets would suggest.

A series of Canadian studies known as The Halo Effect examined rural and urban places of worship, both large and small, to find the difference between what they spend and the value they contribute to their communities. The gap is the result of the Halo Effect. Using the same

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rigorous logic that is applied to determining the economic value of sporting and cultural events to a community, the report found that places of worship provide much more community value than their operating budgets would suggest (Wood Daly, 2016). When applied to all places of worship, they contribute an annual benefit of almost \$17.5 billion to Canadian society, equivalent to 1.1% of the GDP (Wood Daly, 2017).

But what about the return to the taxpayer? Taxpayers fund the income tax credit for donations to religious organizations, the reduction in sales taxes, and the municipal concession on property taxes (where it is granted). Is that investment worth it? It turns out that it is. A study of 16 congregations compared the total amount of “lost” taxes with the socioeconomic benefit contributed by those congregations and found the return on investment to the taxpayer was more than 10 times higher than the “lost” taxes. That means, for example, that if a municipality were to start collecting property taxes from places of worship, every dollar redirected from program expenses to property tax, the community would lose \$10 of community benefit from those places of worship (Wood Daly, 2019). Since places of worship are far more cost effective than government bureaucracy, every Canadian pays less taxes than they would if the government tried to provide the same benefits.

The evidence shows that religion helps people become better citizens who manifest the traits that live up to our best ideals for society. Very Committed religious people do more than their fair share to support Canada’s charitable sector. Their places of worship make substantial contributions to their local communities, and they do all this while providing a significant return on investment to the Canadian taxpayer.

While the research shows conclusively that everyone does benefit from religion, it is worth considering if there could be other, non-religious ways of achieving the same results? Alain de Botton tried to make the case that the benefits of religion could be reproduced by secular means in his book *Religion for Atheists: A non-believer’s guide to the uses of religion*, but he rejects right from the start the “secret sauce” that makes religion work: the belief that there is a Higher Power, gods, or God that is external to humanity. Religious people, because of this belief, understand that the world does not revolve around them, but that they are part of something bigger than themselves. Their most basic worldview is based on a religious belief, that because there is “something bigger,” life is lived in community and there are communal responsibilities to religious and non-religious people alike. That perspective turns the focus of religious people outward and inspires them to find fulfilment in serving others.

Michael McConnell, professor of law at Stanford University, addresses the issue of whether the public benefits of religion are just the sum of individual religious practices that could be replaced by secular practices (which de Botton believes) or religion’s benefits are the product of religious practices working synergistically. His description of how the practice of religion works as a single, holistic, comprehensive system is a great explanation of why religion is so effective at producing prosocial people who do so much good for Canadian society:

“Religion bears resemblances to, and has differences from, a wide variety of other human concerns. Religion is a special phenomenon, in part, because it plays such a wide variety of roles in human life: it is an institution, but it is more than that; it is an ideology or worldview, but it is more than that; it is a set of personal loyalties and locus of community, akin to family ties, but it is more than that; it is an aspect of identity, but it is more than that; it provides answers to questions of ultimate reality, and offers a connection to the transcendent; but it is more than

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that. Religion cannot be reduced to a subset of any larger category. In any particular context, religion may appear to be analogous to some other aspect of human activity – to another institution, worldview, personal loyalty, basis of personal identity, or answer to ultimate and transcendent questions. However, there is no other human phenomenon that combines all of these aspects; if there were such a concept, it would probably be viewed as a religion” (McConnell, 2000, p. 42).

All Canadians – including those who would say “Religion isn’t for me” – benefit from the attitudes and behaviours that are nurtured and developed within places of worship, and also from the broad public access to organized religion’s community programs, meeting spaces, donations, volunteers, and more.

For those of religious faith, there are many more benefits to be derived from their engagement with religion, but religion’s four public benefits are available to all.

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