

ity of human rights,” notably Ronald Dworkin, Martha Nussbaum, and John Finnis, but falter at the point of justification. Finnis, a Catholic thinker who nevertheless looks for a nonreligious basis of morality, is reduced to arguing that it is “*unreasonable* for those who value their own well-being to intentionally harm the well-being of other human beings,” says Perry. Leaving aside the fact that some people don’t care about being reasonable, it’s easy to imagine circumstances in which one’s self or one’s child were threatened and the only recourse was to harm another person.

In a 1993 address to the World Conference on Human Rights, U.S. secretary of state Warren Christopher made the case for human rights by arguing that “states with the worst human-rights records tend also to be the world’s aggressors,” and sources of instability. True, says Perry, but self-interest isn’t enough to motivate the United States or other powers to promote strongly what one scholar calls “the human rights of foreigners.”

Philosopher Richard Rorty believes that the whole quest for a secular justification is misguided. If Westerners are “trying to get everyone to be more like us,” says Rorty, “it would be better to say: Here is what we in the West look like as a result of ceasing to hold slaves, beginning to educate women, separating church and state, and so on.” In other words, lead by example.

But Perry believes that such “pragmatism gives you nothing to fall back on, no recourse and no solace, if you fail to swing the deal.” In

the face of monumental horrors such as Auschwitz, the world cannot afford simply to appeal to the better nature of evildoers, waiting for them to adopt good behavior.

Perry appreciates the ability of nonbelievers to carry on with “the important work of ‘changing the world,’” yet he questions how long secular societies can sustain their “bedrock conviction” that “the Other possesses inherent dignity and truly is inviolable.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Religious Dysfunction

THE SOURCE: “Is Faith Good for Us?” by Phil Zuckerman, in *Free Inquiry*, Aug.–Sept. 2006.

WHEN JERRY FALWELL blamed the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on Americans’ lack of piety, he spoke for many religious conservatives who believe that the failure to place God at the center of national life is responsible for crime, poverty, disease, and warfare.

To the contrary, Phil Zuckerman, an associate professor of sociology at Pitzer College, writes that “the most secular countries—those with the highest proportion of atheists and agnostics—are among the most stable, peaceful, free, wealthy, and healthy societies.” The presence of atheists and agnostics doesn’t cause a country to be better off, he says, nor does the presence of religiosity plunge a nation into chaos. The well-being of a nation is caused by political, historical, economic, and

sociological factors quite separate from religious beliefs.

Even so, the top five nations on the United Nations’ Human Development Index—Norway, Sweden, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands—are all in the top 25 in proportion of nonbelievers. Between 64 and 85 percent of Swedes and 19 to 30 percent of Canadians say there is no God. The other countries are in between. The bottom 50 countries on the human development index lack statistically significant levels of atheism.

Zuckerman does not count the countries, such as North Korea and Vietnam, where atheism has been imposed. But nations where citizens have abandoned religion by choice tend to fare well on measures of well-being such as life expectancy, literacy, income, and education, while highly religious states do poorly.

Less religious countries have the lowest infant mortality rates in the world, religious countries the highest. Among the 40 poorest countries in the world, all but one—Vietnam—are deemed religious. Two separate studies of non-African countries show that most nations with the highest rates of homicide are religious, while those with the lowest rates are generally not.

The exception to the trend is suicide; people who are religiously observant tend to be less likely to kill themselves than others.

“Belief in God may provide comfort to the individual believer, but, at the societal level, its results do not compare at all favorably with [those] of the more secular societies,” Zuckerman writes.