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ARTICLE

TEN REASONS WE NEED RIGOROUS RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE COMPASSION

BYRON R. JOHNSON*

I. BACKGROUND

A mounting body of empirical evidence documents that higher levels of religious practices or involvement (or what I have termed organic religion)¹ has significant beneficial effects. Over the last several decades, thousands of studies published in peer-reviewed journals document that religion is associated with making people happier,² healthier,³ better spouses,⁴ more generous,⁵ more ethical,⁶ more tolerant,⁷ and more active and responsible citizens.⁸

Research has explored religion's varied social contributions, ranging from increasing civic participation to ministering to spiritual, physical, emotional, economic, and other life needs. Other studies have examined

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1. See BYRON R. JOHNSON, RALPH B. TOMPKINS & DEREK WEBB, OBJECTIVE HOPE: ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 5 (2008).

2. ARTHUR C. BROOKS, THE CONSERVATIVE HEART: HOW TO BUILD A FAIRER, HAPPIER, AND MORE PROSPEROUS AMERICA 30–31 (2012); RODNEY STARK, AMERICA'S BLESSINGS: HOW RELIGION BENEFITS EVERYONE, INCLUDING ATHEISTS 95–96 (2012).

3. See Tyler J. VanderWeele, *Religion and Health: A Synthesis, in SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION WITHIN THE CULTURE OF MEDICINE: FROM EVIDENCE TO PRACTICE* 357–401 (Michael Balboni & John R. Peteet eds., 2017).

4. Christopher G. Ellison, Amy M. Burdette & W. Bradford Wilcox, *The Couple that Prays Together: Race and Ethnicity, Religion, and Relationship Quality Among Working-Age Adults*, 72 J. OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAM. 963, 964 (2010).

5. ARTHUR C. BROOKS, WHO REALLY CARES: THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT COMPASSION-ATE CONSERVATISM 37 (2007).

6. See RODNEY STARK, THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH: WHY THE WORLD IS MORE RELIGIOUS THAN EVER 136–41 (2015).

7. BROOKS, *supra* note 5, at 5–6.

8. See generally HAROLD G. KOENIG, D.E. KING & V.B. CARSON, HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND HEALTH (2nd ed. 2012).

how religious participation is linked to educational achievement,⁹ civic engagement,¹⁰ character development,¹¹ longevity,¹² coping,¹³ and stress reduction.¹⁴

Still other research has probed how religious engagement and involvement can help decrease crime,¹⁵ increase sobriety,¹⁶ and promote mental and physical health.¹⁷ Scholars have also assessed the conditions under which religious commitment improves government stability and economic growth,¹⁸ and how congregations enhance social capital and networks of social support that aid human flourishing.¹⁹ In sum, there is a significant body of empirical evidence in the form of thousands of published studies that demonstrate the ways in which organic religion is linked to a host of protective factors as well as prosocial outcomes.²⁰

Stated differently, there is mounting evidence documenting that religiosity protects or insulates individuals from harmful outcomes, while also contributing to prosocial or salutary outcomes. In spite of this growing research literature, there remains a need for new research which attempts to

9. William H. Jeynes, *A Meta-Analysis on the Effects and Contributions of Public, Charter, and Religious Schools on Student Outcomes*, 87 PEABODY J. EDUC. 305 (2014).

10. See Corwin Smidt, *Religion and Civic Engagement: A Comparative Analysis*, 565 ANNALS OF THE AM. ACAD. OF POL. AND SOC. SCI. 176–92 (1999); ROBERT D. PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* 65–79 (2000).

11. Elaine Holcomb, *Religion as an Agent in the Development of Character and Personality*, 52 RELIGIOUS EDUC. 212 (1957).

12. Tyler J. VanderWeele, Julie R. Palmer & Alexandra E. Shields, *VanderWeele et al. Respond to “Church Attendance and Morality”*, 185 AM. J. OF EPIDEMIOLOGY 526, 526–28 (2017).

13. Kenneth Pargament, Margaret Feuille & Donna Burdzy, *The Brief RCOPE: Current Psychometric Status of a Short Measure of Religious Coping*, 2 RELIGIONS 51, 52 (2011).

14. Neal Krause, *Evaluating the Stress-Buffering Function on Meaning in Life Among Older People*, 19 J. AGING AND HEALTH 792 (2007); Neal Krause, R. David Hayward, Deborah Bruce & Cynthia Woolever, *Gratitude to God, Self-Rated Health, and Depressive Symptoms*, 53 J. FOR SCI. STUDY OF RELIGION 341, 342–46 (2014).

15. See generally BYRON R. JOHNSON, *MORE GOD LESS CRIME: WHY FAITH MATTERS AND HOW IT COULD MATTER MORE* (2011); BYRON R. JOHNSON & SUNG JOON JANG, *Religion and Crime: Assessing the Role of the Faith Factor*, in CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY AND RESEARCH: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, PAPERS FROM THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CRIMINOLOGY 2010 CONFERENCE 117, 120–21 (Richard Rosenfeld, Kenna Quinet & Crystal Garcia eds., 2012).

16. See BYRON R. JOHNSON, MARIA E. PAGANO, MATTHEW T. LEE & STEPHEN G. POST, *Alone on the Inside: The Impact of Social Isolation and Helping Others on AOD Use and Criminal Activity*, 50 YOUTH AND SOC’Y 529, 530 (2018).

17. Hisham Abu-Raiya & Kenneth I. Pargament, *On the Links Between Religion and Health: What has Empirical Research Taught Us?*, in OXFORD TEXTBOOK OF SPIRITUALITY IN HEALTHCARE 333, 337 (Mark Cobb, Christina Puchalski & Bruce Rumbold eds., 2012).

18. See ROBERT D. WOODBERY, *The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy*, 106 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 244, 267–68 (2012); BRIAN J. GRIM & MELISSA E. GRIM, *The Socio-Economic Contribution of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis*, 12 INTERDISC. J. RES. ON RELIGION, no. 3, 2016, at 1.

19. ROBERT D. PUTNAM & DAVID E. CAMPBELL, *AMERICAN GRACE: HOW RELIGION DIVIDES AND UNITES US* (2012).

20. See generally BROOKS, *supra* note 5; STARK, *supra* note 6.

translate these findings in a way that quantifies and assesses the value of religion to society in tangible and economic terms.

To this end, sociologist Brian Grim designed an innovative study intended to answer this question. This study, published in 2016, provides a preliminary but plausible estimate of the economic contribution of religion to American society. Drawing from a host of different data sources, Grim provides initial estimates that religion contributes approximately \$1.2 trillion to the U.S. economy each year.²¹ Grim focused on data from (1) religious congregations, (2) other religious institutions, and (3) faith-inspired businesses.²² As Grim argues, the contribution of religion in the U.S. is equivalent to being the world's fifteenth largest national economy, putting it ahead of about 180 other countries.²³

Grim's research on the economic impact of religion in society is not the only academic study to suggest religion contributes to the common good. For example, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam made an extraordinary claim when he stated that approximately half of the total repository of social capital in the U.S. resides within America's houses of worship:

Houses of worship build and sustain more social capital—and social capital of more varied forms—than any other type of institution in America. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship provide a vibrant institutional base for civic good works and a training ground for civic entrepreneurs. Roughly speaking, nearly half of America's stock of social capital is religious or religiously affiliated, whether measured by association memberships, philanthropy, or volunteering.²⁴

II. FAITH-BASED COMPASSION

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) have been part of public life for decades and many of the most prominent FBOs have been in existence for over 100 years.²⁵ By some estimates, FBOs provide \$20 billion of privately contributed funds to social service delivery for over 70 million Americans annually.²⁶ I have previously referred to the diverse and compassionate interventions of religious groups, congregations, and FBOs as intentional re-

21. Grim & Grim, *supra* note 18, at 24, 27.

22. *Id.* at 5–25.

23. *Id.* at 27.

24. ROBERT D. PUTNAM ET AL., BETTER TOGETHER: REPORT OF THE SAGUARO SEMINAR 65 (2001).

25. For example, the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions was founded in 1913 and the Salvation Army was founded in 1865. *About*, CITYGATE NETWORK, <https://www.citygatenetwork.org/agrm/About.asp> (last visited Jan. 29, 2019); *History of the Salvation Army*, THE SALVATION ARMY, <https://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/history-of-the-salvation-army/> (last visited Jan. 29, 2019).

26. JOHNSON, TOMPKINS & WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 7.

ligion.²⁷ Unlike organic religion, there is little published research evaluating the effectiveness of the compassionate work performed by so many different FBOs (e.g., Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, etc.). So what exactly do we know about the effectiveness of these FBOs and the compassionate social services they provide? Supporters of intentional religion regularly claim success in addressing difficult-to-solve social problems (e.g., drug treatment, offender rehabilitation, outreach to at-risk youth, and other disadvantaged populations). But is the empirical evidence that faith-based compassion is as effective as proponents seem to think?

Putnam and Grim's claims point to the far-reaching ways by which religion may influence individuals and society more generally. Yet I believe it is quite possible they underestimate the total value or impact of religion on the common good. For example, Putnam and Grim do not measure or estimate many of the important and consequential ways faith-motivated individuals and organizations provide a host of social services designed to address difficult-to-solve social problems. To be more specific, Putnam and Grim do not take into consideration the role of faith-based interventions or approaches in addressing: (1) crime reduction, (2) drug and alcohol treatment, (3) prisoner rehabilitation and reentry, (4) literacy programs, (5) the mentoring of at-risk youth, (6) housing for the homeless, (7) disaster relief, and (8) healthcare. This is only a partial list of the many areas where compassionate interventions that are faith-based are prominent.

III. WHY DO WE NEED RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE COMPASSION?

Based on an extensive and systematic search, I found only a very small body of research that examines the efficiency of FBOs in carrying out compassionate social services.²⁸ However, this small literature almost uniformly finds positive evidence that faith-based compassion is effective in addressing social problems.²⁹

Though Putnam and Grim have made laudable strides in quantifying the impact of religion on society, there is clearly a need for scholarship dedicated to examining this largely neglected area of inquiry. This much-needed body of research should draw upon both quantitative as well as

27. *Id.*

28. By utilizing various online computer database searches, we identified relevant research with the following key terms: "faith-based and evaluation," "faith-based and study," "faith-based and social services," "church and social services," and "faith-based organization." Specifically, we used the Public Affairs Information System International (PAIS), Social Work Abstracts (SWAB), ISI Citation Indexes (includes Social Science Citation Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Science Citation Index), American Theological Library Association (ATLA), Social Science Research Network (SSRN), Academic Index, Sociological Abstracts, Social Service Abstracts, the Social Science Index, Dissertation Abstracts International, Social Science Electronic Data Library (SSEDL), and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) online searches.

29. JOHNSON, TOMPKINS & WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 22.

qualitative research methodologies. Moreover, this research should come from a variety of disciplinary perspectives including psychology, political science, public health, demography, sociology, and economics.

Reason #1: We need to know the extent and prevalence of faith-based social services.

Intentional religion's vast contributions to society for the common good may seem obvious to those who pay serious attention to the work of faith-based groups.³⁰ These contributions, however, are often not obvious even to religious adherents, let alone non-religious people or other secular observers. There is no national register or central repository of faith-based organizations. Consequently, we do not know where or how many faith-based groups have programs that actively address any number of different social problems (e.g., homelessness, mentoring of at-risk youth, drug and alcohol treatment, adoption/foster care, and disaster relief).

Reason #2: We need to know the actual social impact or economic value of faith-based groups to society.

Despite the thousands of studies documenting the benefits of religion and religious practices to individuals as well as to society, only a small number of studies have examined the contributions or effectiveness of faith-based organizations.³¹ Stated differently, the vast majority of faith-based organizations are not able to answer objectively how well they are providing an intentional and compassionate response to some particular societal problem. This lack of knowledge represents a tragic and unnecessary blind spot for thousands of faith-based organizations. Beyond anecdotal accounts, we do not know how well the majority of faith-based organizations are doing in serving those in need or addressing social problems. Stated bluntly, we do not know if the work of most faith-based organizations is effective or not.

There is no doubt that Americans are generous in their support of many faith-based organizations and groups, but we do not know if this generosity translates into measurable social impact. This lack of research is regrettable because what little we do know from the available research provides a preliminary indication that the impact of faith-based organizations may likely be far more consequential for the common good than people imagine.³² As stated previously, Grim provides preliminary evidence that religion contributes approximately \$1.2 trillion to the U.S. economy each year;³³ though this estimate is likely too conservative since it does not take

30. See generally KOENIG ET AL., *supra* note 8.

31. JOHNSON, TOMPKINS & WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 7.

32. See generally JOHNSON, *supra* note 15.

33. Grim & Grim, *supra* note 18.

into account the vast work of faith-based organizations. But this optimism does not change the fact that we are generally lacking rigorous accounts of the extent, prevalence, and degree to which faith-based organizations may be positively impacting society.

Reason #3: Rigorous research can document the effectiveness of faith-based interventions.

Because there is much discussion today of media bias, an instructive exercise is scanning the headlines of major newspapers or doing a quick check on the internet for news stories on religion. One may be surprised to learn that a majority of the stories on religion will likely have a negative tone (e.g., religion is in decline, scandals involving religious leaders, the dramatic rise of the “none” or the unaffiliated, etc.). Despite the thousands of studies documenting the salutary effect of religion across a range of outcomes, there are very few media accounts of how religion may be associated with any beneficial outcome.

Perhaps one reason we hear so little about the positive impact of religion is that the work of faith-based organizations and faith-motivated groups is often overlooked.³⁴ A major factor contributing to this oversight is that the effectiveness of most faith-based organizations has yet to be demonstrated in rigorous research that leads to publications in peer-reviewed journals. Even large faith-based organizations (e.g., Salvation Army, World Vision, Samaritan’s Purse, or International Justice Mission) have rarely been evaluated in any independent or objective way that has resulted in academic publications. In the event a new literature were to emerge demonstrating the effectiveness of faith-based organizations, it would make it easier for policymakers and the media to take notice of the impact of these groups on the common good.³⁵

Rigorous research evaluating the effectiveness of faith-based organizations can be beneficial to these organizations in improving the quality of their work. Unfortunately, this kind of research has largely been lacking, though there have been some notable exceptions. Compassion International and Prison Fellowship (PF) are two faith-based organizations that can point to empirical research demonstrating that their programs have been associated with positive outcomes.³⁶ Compassion International is a child advocacy ministry that pairs concerned people with children who are suffering

34. JOHNSON, TOMPKINS & WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 22; see BYRON R. JOHNSON & DAVID B. LARSON, *THE INNERCHANGE FREEDOM INITIATIVE: A PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF A FAITH-BASED PRISON PROGRAM* 6–13 (2003).

35. See generally Marita G. Titler, *The Evidence for Evidence-Based Practice Implementation*, in *PATIENT SAFETY AND QUALITY: AN EVIDENCE-BASED HANDBOOK FOR NURSES* 126 (Rhonda G. Hughes ed., 2008).

36. See *Does Child Sponsorship Work?*, COMPASSION INTERNATIONAL, <https://www.compassion.com/does-child-sponsorship-work.htm> (last visited Jan. 14, 2019); see also Johnson & Jang, *supra* note 15, at 102–13; JOHNSON, *supra* note 15.

from poverty.³⁷ The ministry seeks to release children from spiritual, economic, social, and physical poverty.³⁸ The goal is for each child to become a responsible and fulfilled adult.³⁹ Scientific studies have documented that child sponsorship through Compassion International has a positive effect on school completion and the probability and quality of adult employment;⁴⁰ on overall dwelling quality in adulthood;⁴¹ and raises the levels of hope, happiness, and self-efficacy.⁴² These initial studies indicate that Compassion International has a positive influence in various countries around the world. The investment in child-sponsorship is a much larger enterprise than people might think. According to Bruce Wydick, Americans give more than \$3 billion per year to child sponsorship alone.⁴³

PF seeks to restore those affected by crime and incarceration by introducing prisoners, victims, and their families to a new hope available through Jesus Christ.⁴⁴ PF accomplishes this goal by training and inspiring churches and communities—inside and outside of prison—to support the restoration of those affected by incarceration. Published studies have confirmed the effectiveness of PF programs in reducing prisoner recidivism as well as the economic benefit to society as a result.⁴⁵ A cost-benefit analysis of PF's InnerChange Freedom Initiative in Minnesota showed that each inmate participant saved taxpayers \$1,800.⁴⁶

37. See COMPASSION INTERNATIONAL, <https://www.compassion.com> (last visited Jan. 14, 2019).

38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. Bruce Wydick, Paul Glewwe & Laine Rutledge, *Does International Child Sponsorship Work? A Six-Country Study of Impacts on Adult Life Outcomes*, 121 J. POL. ECON. 393, 393 (2013).

41. Bruce Wydick, Paul Glewwe & Laine Rutledge, *Does Child Sponsorship Pay Off in Adulthood? An International Study of Impacts on Income and Wealth*, 31 WORLD BANK ECON. REV. 434, 434 (2017).

42. Paul Glewwe, Philip H. Ross & Bruce Wydick, *Developing Hope Among Impoverished Children: Using Child Self-Portraits to Measure Poverty Program Impacts*, 53 J. HUM. RESOURCES 330, 330 (2018).

43. Wydick, Glewwe & Rutledge, *supra* note 40, at 394.

44. PRISON FELLOWSHIP, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org> (last visited Jan. 15, 2019).

45. Byron R. Johnson, David B. Larson & Timothy C. Pitts, *Religious Programming, Institutional Adjustment, and Recidivism among Former Inmates in Prison Fellowship Programs*, 14 JUST. Q. 145, 145 (1997); Byron R. Johnson, *Religious Programs and Recidivism among Former Inmates in Prison Fellowship Programs: A Long-Term Follow-up Study*, 21 JUST. Q. 329 (2004). See generally JOHNSON, *supra* note 15; Johnson & Jang, *supra* note 15, at 130; Byron R. Johnson, *Can a Faith-Based Prison Reduce Recidivism?*, 73 CORRECTIONS TODAY 60, 61–62 (2012).

46. Grant Duwe & Byron R. Johnson, *Estimating the Benefits of a Faith-Based Correctional Program*, 2 INT'L J. CRIMINOLOGY AND SOC. 227 (2013).

Reason #4: Research will help to improve and expand faith-based approaches.

Many faith-based organizations may be delivering outstanding services and helping to foster human flourishing. We are generally lacking empirical evidence, however, that proves this point. This lack of knowledge is disappointing since we have the tools to assess the effectiveness of faith-based organizations and the capability to determine how well they work. If faith-based approaches are found to be ineffective, research can help us understand why, and what adjustments may be needed to modify these interventions in order to become effective. If research finds faith-based compassion to be significantly more effective than secular approaches, research can identify additional ways to become even more effective and impactful for the common good.

If and when interventions are found to be effective, there tends to be an accompanying motivation to take these proven initiatives to other jurisdictions.⁴⁷ Research can help understand how best to replicate these faith-based approaches in different environments and jurisdictions. Replication and scalability may seem like an easy proposition, but they are not. Research can help with the process of taking successful faith-based programs to scale.

Reason #5: Research can help change practice and policy regarding faith-based organizations.

In an age of evidence-based government, empirical research can provide policymakers and practitioners—in government and the private sector—with findings and data that can be used to produce better interventions and outcomes. If faith-based approaches are found to be more effective than their secular counterparts, it would seem to make sense to pay more attention to religious communities and faith-based approaches and to encourage these resources as potential aids to the common good. Instead of religion being viewed as irrelevant or even harmful or something to be restricted,⁴⁸ policymakers and practitioners should have access to rigorous research which evaluates the value of working with religious communities and faith-based organizations as partners in addressing difficult-to-solve social problems.

Systematic evaluation comparing religious and non-religious interventions can help to identify the most cost-effective strategies for addressing a

47. See Rodrigo S. Reis et al., *Scaling Up Physical Activity Interventions Worldwide: Stepping Up to Larger and Smarter Approaches to Get People Moving*, 388 LANCET 1337, 1341–42 (2016).

48. See generally TIMOTHY SAMUEL SHAH, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: WHY NOW? DEFENDING AN EMBATTLED HUMAN RIGHT (2012); 2 CHRISTIANITY AND FREEDOM: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES (Allen D. Hertzke & Timothy Samuel Shah eds., 2017).

variety of social and economic outcomes that are relevant for human flourishing and the common good. Ongoing research of this kind could help us understand, for example, how sacred and secular partnerships may lead to even more cost-effective interventions and outcomes. Identifying best practices could lead to new collaborations that help secular agencies and faith-based organizations better to harness and promote the common good among the populations they serve.

Reason #6: We do not know how religious congregations impact their neighborhoods.

We are in dire need of research on religious congregations in order to estimate the financial benefit of the many social services they provide. Most houses of worship have a number of ministries providing various kinds of social services in local communities,⁴⁹ but we do not know the extent of these services or what effect they have. Preliminary research, however, may be giving us a glimpse of the positive and consequential ways in which churches, synagogues, and mosques are fostering the common good. For example, a recent study of active historic houses of worship in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Fort Worth concludes religious congregations accounted for over \$3 billion in annual impact for the three cities combined.⁵⁰ We are in desperate need of research on religious congregations and the social services they do or do not provide in order to begin estimating the impact of houses of worship across the country.

According to most publications on the prevalence of congregations, it is estimated that there are currently somewhere between 300,000 and 350,000 houses of worship in the U.S.⁵¹ A team of social scientists has just completed a new set of studies in Texas, Washington, and Virginia documenting that forty to fifty percent of religious congregations are not being counted in directories and reference documents such as the 2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study.⁵² The kinds of congregations that are systematically being overlooked in such publications are not Mainline denominations that are in decline but largely tend to

49. See generally RAM A. CNAAN, STEPHANIE C. BODDIE, CHARLENE MCGREW & JENNIFER KANG, *THE OTHER PHILADELPHIA STORY: HOW LOCAL CONGREGATIONS SUPPORT QUALITY OF LIFE IN URBAN AMERICA* (2006); RAM A. CNAAN, STEPHANIE C. BODDIE, FEMIDA HANDY, GAYNOR YANCEY & RICHARD SCHNEIDER, *THE INVISIBLE CARING HAND: AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS AND THE PROVISION OF WELFARE* (2002).

50. PARTNERS FOR SACRED PLACES, *THE ECONOMIC HALO EFFECT OF HISTORIC SACRED PLACES* 4 (2016).

51. C. GRAMMICH, K. HADAWAY, R. HOUSEAL, D.E. JONES, A. KRINDATCH, R. STANLEY, R.H. TAYLOR & THE ASS'N OF STATISTICIANS OF AM. RELIGIOUS BODIES, *2010 U.S. RELIGION CENSUS: RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS & MEMBERSHIP STUDY. AN ENUMERATION BY NATION, STATE AND COUNTY BASED ON DATA REPORTED FOR 236 RELIGIOUS GROUPS* (2012).

52. *Id.* at ix.

be African American, Latino, Pentecostal, and nondenominational congregations.⁵³

We need empirical research on religious congregations to determine the impact these groups are having in addressing social problems and advancing human flourishing within the neighborhoods and communities where they are located.

Reason #7: Research can help change attitudes and policies related to religious freedom.

In a day when religious freedom is under threat in a majority of countries throughout the world,⁵⁴ it is increasingly necessary to provide citizens, policymakers, religious leaders, and others with empirical data regarding the contributions of religion for the global common good. Research that accurately estimates the economic value and social contribution of the “faith factor” should make it easier to advocate that society benefits when religion is allowed to flourish. Conversely, society will suffer when religion is restricted.⁵⁵ In this way, research can help to combat the forces behind religious persecution. Moreover, producing scholarship which quantifies the impact of religion for the common good may go a long way to protecting religious freedom around the world.

Reason #8: We do not know the return on investment of religious philanthropy/generosity.

We have many blind spots when it comes to the question of effective compassion. For example, we know that many Americans are very generous, as they cumulatively give away more than one billion dollars per day.⁵⁶ Yet most philanthropic initiatives or investments are not assessed to determine if they are effective. We have paid little attention to the return on investment (ROI) on these half-trillion-dollar social investments.

Moreover, we know that millions of Americans are involved in a variety of prosocial and volunteer activities.⁵⁷ But precious little research has

53. *Id.*

54. See PEW RESEARCH CENTER, GLOBAL RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGION RISE MODESTLY IN 2015, REVERSING DOWNWARD TREND 17 (2017), <http://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2017/04/Pew-Research-Center-Religious-Restrictions-2017-FULL-REPORT.pdf>.

55. See 2 CHRISTIANITY AND FREEDOM: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES, *supra* note 48; UNDER CAESAR’S SWORD: HOW CHRISTIANS RESPOND TO PERSECUTION (Daniel Philpott & Timothy Samuel Shah eds., 2018); see also Brian J. Grim, *Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis*, 10 INTERDISC. J. RES. ON RELIGION, no. 4, 2014, at 14–15.

56. GIVING USA, GIVING USA 2018: THE ANNUAL REPORT ON PHILANTHROPY FOR THE YEAR 2017 (2018).

57. See generally MARC A. MUSICK & JOHN WILSON, VOLUNTEERS: A SOCIAL PROFILE (2008); BROOKS, *supra* note 5, at 4; STARK, *supra* note 2, at 118–20; JAY F. HEIN, THE QUIET REVOLUTION (2014).

estimated the value of volunteerism as well as a host of other-minded time investments. Consequently, we do not know the degree to which this generosity is having an impact for the common good.

It is hard to imagine wealthy entrepreneurs continuing to make financial investments in the stock market or some other business enterprise without ever asking for reliable and valid data on how their investment is performing. It seems unrealistic that someone would buy a company without ever asking about ROI. What is the likelihood that a venture capitalist would make a substantial investment simply based on an anecdote? One could easily argue this is exactly what happens most of the time when people contribute to faith-based organizations or religious charities. As an act of good stewardship,⁵⁸ should we not expect to know what kind of ROI faith-based organizations achieve?

In a series of case studies colleagues and I have conducted over the last several years, we have found that faith-based organizations provide substantial ROI.⁵⁹ The studies have, in turn, helped these organizations become more attentive to mission statements, logic models, and systematic data collection.⁶⁰ This process has helped them to better determine if they are staying on mission and the degree to which they are achieving their goals and objectives.⁶¹

Reason #9: Systematic research on faith-based organizations and interventions could change public opinion about religion's impact for good.

Consider the following facts: (1) most people in America claim to be religious; (2) most people believe in God; (3) most people regularly pray; and (4) Atheism is not increasing, but holding steady at four percent.⁶² Considering these facts, one might expect to find that most Americans have a positive attitude toward religion or religious institutions.

Despite thousands of studies documenting that religion is associated with a host of beneficial outcomes, a Gallup survey from 2015 found the lowest level of public confidence in organized religion since Gallup started collecting data on religion.⁶³ It is also noteworthy that most media accounts

58. Matthew 25:14–30.

59. *Case Studies*, BAYLOR UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDIES OF RELIGION, <http://www.baylorisr.org/publications/case-studies/> (last visited Jan. 15, 2019).

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.*

62. RODNEY STARK, *WHAT AMERICANS REALLY BELIEVE: NEW FINDINGS FROM THE BAYLOR SURVEYS OF RELIGION* (2008).

63. Linda Saad, *Confidence in Religion at New Low, but Not Among Catholics*, GALLUP POLL SOC. SERIES, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/183674/confidence-religion-new-low-not-among-catholics.aspx> (last visited Jan. 15, 2019).

of religion tend to be negative in nature.⁶⁴ If systematic research and published studies on faith-based organizations and interventions could become commonplace, perhaps it could be helpful in changing the way Americans perceive faith-based approaches to social problems. Published research on faith-based organizations may help scholars, practitioners, and ordinary citizens pay greater attention to the impact of religion to enhance the common good. The compelling nature of this proposed research could prompt a growing number of scholars to collect more data and conduct more rigorous research across the disciplines (e.g., health, education, crime, civic engagement, etc.) on the impact of religion on human flourishing. By making this research available and readily accessible, misconceptions about the role of religion may be corrected.

Reason #10: Research will help communicate where society would be without religion and faith-based organizations.

Once we can begin to understand through rigorous research the contributions and value that religion, faith-based organizations, and houses of worship bring to society, we can also begin to estimate the counterfactual—where would society be without religion? What would happen if the thousands of faith-based organizations providing social services in the U.S. and around the world ceased to exist? What would life in the U.S. and the rest of the world be without the human and spiritual capital embedded within the more than estimated 500,000 religious congregations in America alone? We do not have valid and reliable answers for these questions—but we should.

IV. CONCLUSION: A RESEARCH HUB COULD MULTIPLY EFFECTIVE COMPASSION

As a first step in producing research on effective compassion, Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR) has been publishing case studies and scientific journal articles on the work of faith-based organizations.⁶⁵ Modeled after case studies published by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, ISR case studies have examined faith-based efforts to address the plight of at-risk youth, homelessness, the high school dropout problem, youth violence, drug treatment, offender rehabilitation, and prisoner reentry.⁶⁶ These case studies have conducted ROI studies of faith-based groups

64. Berkley Center, *Measuring Faith: Quantifying and Examining Religion's Contributions to American Society*, YouTube (Oct. 19, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_mKdk4Xq84.

65. *Case Studies*, *supra* note 59.

66. *Id.*

like Serve West Dallas,⁶⁷ Prison Entrepreneurship Program,⁶⁸ Violence Free Zone,⁶⁹ and on faith-motivated approaches to addressing homelessness,⁷⁰ healthcare,⁷¹ and the plight of children of prisoners.⁷²

A research hub for effective compassion will likely require a coalition between a number of faith-based universities (e.g., Baylor, Pepperdine, Wheaton, Calvin, and Adventist University of Health Sciences) whose very mission statements affirm the centrality of effective compassion. This is a call for leading faith-based universities to come together to engage the question of the effectiveness of faith-based organizations in contributing to the global common good with a multi-level, interdisciplinary research project. This type of research holds the potential not only to help us understand the breadth and scope of the work completed by faith-based organizations, but also to help us understand how to improve effectiveness of compassionate outreach. The same can be said for faith-based generosity and philanthropy. Which faith-based organizations provide the best ROI? Regrettably, we do not have an answer to that question that can be defended in any objective or scientific way.

The basic idea of a university-based research hub is to build a place where people and organizations involved in faith-based compassion can come together to collaborate and coordinate activities.⁷³ In the same way the existence of a university is a catalyst for research, or the existence of a market is a catalyst for capital transactions, so too will the existence of a central hub for research on effective compassion be a catalyst for our understanding and defense of faith-based organizations dedicated to compassionate outreach. A research hub could help enable partnerships between and among currently existing organizations; it could facilitate the exchange of information and the effective use of specializations. It could bring attention to the crucial contributions that faith-based organizations make to a flourishing society. It could establish a reputation for excellence that increases

67. BYRON JOHNSON, WILLIAM WUBBENHORST, CURTIS SCHROEDER & SOON JOON JANG, *SERVE WEST DALLAS: COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION IN WEST DALLAS: A SUSTAINED COLLECTIVE AMONG CHURCHES, FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND GOVERNMENT* (2014).

68. BYRON JOHNSON, WILLIAM WUBBENHORST & CURTIS SCHROEDER, *RECIDIVISM REDUCTION AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT: AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE PRISON ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAM* (2013).

69. BYRON JOHNSON, WILLIAM WUBBENHORST, ANDREW GLUCK, SOON JOON JANG & SUMNER WUBBENHORST, *THE VIOLENCE FREE ZONE (VFZ) INITIATIVE: EVALUATION OF THE MULTI-STATE MENTORING INITIATIVE* (2018).

70. BYRON JOHNSON, WILLIAM WUBBENHORST & ALFREDA ALVAREZ, *ASSESSING THE FAITH-BASED RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA: FINDINGS FROM ELEVEN CITIES* (2017).

71. BYRON R. JOHNSON & WILLIAM WUBBENHORST, *INCORPORATING FAITH & WORKS WITHIN A HEALTHCARE NETWORK* (2017).

72. BYRON R. JOHNSON, *MENTORING CHILDREN OF PRISONERS: A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL STUDY OF AMACHI, TEXAS* (2014).

73. *The Future of Research Universities. Is the Model of Research-Intensive Universities Still Valid at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century?*, 8 EMBO REP. 804 (2007) (interview with Ken-ichi Arai et. al.).

the visibility and impact of all the partners. Baylor's ISR is eager to partner with others to launch a critically needed research initiative on effective compassion.⁷⁴

74. Baylor's ISR is already a leading research center for the positive role of religion in human life, both private and public. For example, ISR's Jeff Levin, a professor of epidemiology and population health, has authored over 200 scholarly publications, mostly on the instrumental functions of religion for physical and mental health, general well-being, and aging. In my book *More God, Less Crime*, I show that religion is linked to a reduction in recidivism. Rodney Stark is one of the most prolific scholars in the world when it comes to research on the positive impact of faith on the world. His classic book *The Rise of Christianity* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. In addition, Philip Jenkins's work on global Christianity represents some of the most cited and influential scholarship in the world. Thomas Kidd's research on the historical role of religion in the U.S. has become a staple for scholars and students alike interested in religion. ISR non-resident scholar Jay Hein, is a public policy expert and has helped leaders think more intentionally about addressing need in society through the work of faith-based organizations.