

CHAPTER 3

THE PUBLIC BENEFIT OF ‘ADVANCING RELIGION’ AS A CHARITABLE PURPOSE: A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Advancing Religion as a charitable purpose provides Canada with public benefits that represent a very high value to all Canadians, whether of faith or not. These benefits can be sorted into four categories.

First, religion results in *better personal outcomes* that reduce demand on the state’s resources for the justice system and rehabilitation, social support, and health care, due to fewer marital breakdowns, stronger families and social networks, rejection of unlawful behaviour, higher school attendance and graduation, and better mental/physical health and well-being. Religion improves quality of life, increases a sense of personal efficacy, and promotes greater contribution by individuals to society.

Second, religion develops and activates *prosocial attitudes and behaviours*, such as empathy, social responsibility, forgiveness, honesty, kindness, friendliness, generosity, and concern for

others, that improve public civility and result in high levels of generosity and volunteerism that benefit both religious and secular charities and individual Canadians, whether religious or not.

Third, religion has *tangible community benefits* in terms of social capital, infrastructure, and neighbourhood viability and a 12-times return on investment related to tax concessions. Places of worship, due to their low overhead and their ability to use volunteers, produce a socioeconomic value of about 4.5 times their operating budgets to their local neighbourhoods.

Fourth, religion creates *tangible and intangible benefits for the public at large*. Religion and the freedom of religion form the bedrock of modern liberal democracies. Religious freedom is seen as a prototypical freedom that has led to freedom of assembly, speech, and the press. Religion has contributed to the development of public policy and has been linked to greater economic output, improved business ethics, greater environmental responsibility, and a reduction in illegal business practices.

This chapter ends with a non-spiritual explanation of how religion is thought to produce such significant results.

Introduction

Religion benefits those who are religious, but a significant body of research shows how religion also benefits those who are not religious. The well-being of every Canadian, whether of faith or not, is significantly enhanced because religion is part of our society. Two literature surveys have

already been done citing significant research in the United States.¹ The abundance of research canvassed in this chapter will demonstrate that the same benefits apply to Canada as well.

To prove that religion benefits even the non-religious, I will draw on a substantial body of academically rigorous research, much of it by Canadian organizations and academics, with the rest coming from the United States and, to a lesser degree, Europe and Asia.

A significant portion of the Canadian research was conducted by Statistics Canada. Its surveys are repeated regularly, which allows for confidence both in the consistency of certain results over time, and in the trends of other results that are unfolding. For example, its *Giving, Volunteering, and Participating Survey* has been repeated every three years since 1997 and each new set of results has validated the previous results. Other regular surveys of Canadians were conducted between 1975 and the present by various pollsters including Statistics Canada, the World Values Survey, Angus Reid Polling, and Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby. Some additional studies in recent years are not part of a regular series but replicate findings from older studies dating as far back as the early 1950s. In only a few minor instances has more recent research led to questioning or at least nuancing the results of the older research, mostly due to improvements in methodology. However, nothing of significance was found in error.

We can be confident, therefore, that while the religious composition of Canada may be changing, the public benefit of religion remains the same over time. We know the relationships between religion and public benefit reported here are not temporary aberrations, and they are not out of date. They have remained consistent over many decades.

What is changing is the overall impact of religion on society. The declining number of religious Canadians lessens religion's impact because a smaller percentage of the population is transmitting the benefits to the general population. The effects of the decline in religion's impact are already noticeable. The number of donors to charity is declining (dropping by a third between 1990 and 2014);² public civility is declining (the polarization of society has resulted in closed minds on all sides of the issues of the day and the rise in hostility is plainly evident in both the news and social media);³ and volunteering is declining (between 2004 and 2013 the percentage of Canadians who volunteered declined marginally from 45% to 44% of the population but the average number of hours volunteered declined 8% from 168 hours to 154 hours).⁴

Given the decline in Canadian religiosity, Canadian sociologist Kurt Bowen gave a prophetic word to Canada in his 2004 book, *Christians in a Secular World: The Canadian Experience*:

If the expanding body of the Non-Religious is our guide to the future, we may reasonably expect that life satisfaction will decline, concern for others will diminish, marriage will grow more fragile, family and friendship networks will shrink, volunteering will become less frequent, and we will grow ever less generous in our so very affluent world. In a word, our civility is threatened. If this is the victory that secularism and the Enlightenment have wrought, then we have no cause to celebrate.⁵

Declining religiosity is not only a challenge to the religious, but it is also a challenge to the non-religious who are or will be feeling the negative consequences if the decline is not reversed. This

chapter defines the public benefits of advancing religion, but by doing so it also highlights what society risks losing if current downward trends in religiosity continue.

My goal in writing this chapter is to help religious and non-religious Canadians alike fully appreciate the value religion contributes to Canadian society. I also want those working in religious organizations to be inspired by the breadth of the impact they have and to focus on raising up people who take their faith seriously and apply it in every aspect of their lives.

Sociologist Joshua Yates (University of Virginia) notes that the great challenge we face in evaluating the contemporary contributions of religion is that each facet of its contributions is typically assessed in isolation from the others. As a result, he says we ‘easily miss a comprehensive picture of religion’s possible impact on a community and it may be far greater than we have thought.’⁶ While many of the benefits have been evident for years, the enormity of the benefits in their totality has not generally been appreciated. This chapter is my attempt to bring the assessments all together in one place to provide a comprehensive overview of how religion benefits even the most atheistic person in Canada.

It must be noted that, given the historical and demographic significance of Christianity in North American society, the research presented in this chapter primarily relates to the Christian faith. However, research related to other religions has been drawn upon when available. The focus on Christianity should not be problematic since the strongest factor in relation to charitable giving is not *which* religion a person follows, but *how* religious a person is. This conclusion was noted by Robert Putnam, professor of public policy at Harvard, and David Campbell, associate professor

of political science at the University of Notre Dame.⁷ It is also borne out by a number of other papers cited in this chapter.⁸

This chapter does *not* compare religious people to non-religious people. That comparison is misleading as far as determining the benefits of religion because not all people who claim to belong to a religion are statistically similar. Studies that compare the religious to non-religious people, without further distinctions, often find there are no differences between them. An example is a 2008 Barna study.⁹ While Barna found little or no difference between ‘born again’ Christians and the general population in their divorce rates, the methodology was based on reported religious beliefs, not religious practice. The study’s methodology notes that religious attendance was explicitly excluded from consideration. The choice to exclude attendance patterns is significant because study after study shows that those who attend a place of worship at least once per week are statistically very different from all others (as will be shown). It is thus very surprising that Barna chose not to consider it. We will see from other research on divorce that their results would have been quite different had they factored in attendance at worship services.

Knowing that not all people who claim to be religious are the same, sociologists use a spectrum to study the effect of different degrees of religiosity on attitudes and behaviour. In his research, Canadian sociologist Kurt Bowen uses the following nomenclature, which I have adopted:

- Very Committed (people who attend a place of worship *at least* once per week),
- Less Committed (people who attend a place of worship monthly but less than weekly),

- Seekers¹⁰ (people who say they are religious but who rarely or never attend religious services), and
- Non-Religious (people who are not religious and never attend a place of worship).¹¹

Comparing these four categories shows the significant positive effect religion has on people who take their faith seriously, as demonstrated by at least weekly attendance at a place of worship. The Very Committed are distinguishable from all other Canadians. They have a very distinctive psychological profile of prosocial values and sense of well-being. The Less Committed and the Seekers have profiles much more in common with the Non-Religious than with the Very Committed.¹²

I. Better Personal Outcomes

Religion enhances a person's personal outcomes with the result that many social costs are minimized, and their ability to contribute to society is maximized. A systematic review of nearly 800 studies (mostly from recent years) shows conclusively that higher levels of religious involvement and practices are an 'important protective factor that buffers or insulates individuals from deleterious outcomes,' and that those same factors are responsible for 'promoting an array of prosocial behaviours and thus enhancing various beneficial outcomes.' The study's authors conclude, 'Researchers are now in a position to cite hundreds of quality studies in peer-reviewed journals that indicate a striking correspondence between religiosity and general health and well being.'¹³ Several reasons why this is so are outlined here.

More Responsible Choices

First, religious commitment is linked to more responsible choices among all age groups. When it comes to youth, many studies over the years have found that youth participation in religion correlates with lower rates of juvenile delinquency, better school attendance, and increased probability of graduating from high school.¹⁴ As religious socialization rises, so too does educational attainment.¹⁵ Furthermore, delinquency is minimized when both a mother and her child have high religiosity, but when one of the mother or the child is very religious and the other is not, the child has a higher rate of delinquency.¹⁶

Religion affects other choices too. For example, a three-year study of 13,000 high school women found that the ‘intensity of the individual’s religious commitment (religiosity) can be powerfully influential’ in determining who becomes a teenage mother.¹⁷

Religiosity encourages good behaviour, and religious people who are involved in the life of a youth will model and mentor the social skills and coping mechanisms that help youth avoid or resist the common causes of delinquency. Margaret Vaaler’s Ph.D. dissertation found that religion improves relationships between parents and children by bringing them closer together and causing them to communicate more, which creates very supportive relationships between them. Religious family members are more involved with each other.¹⁸ I believe this research suggests that attitudes, behaviours, and choices are more likely to be discussed at home, giving youth the benefit of their parents’ greater knowledge and wisdom when making their choices.

Religion therefore has a ‘protective effect’ on religious youth that reduces their likelihood of engaging in destructive behaviour. These factors have positive economic benefits for communities by reducing incarceration and rehabilitation costs, as well as encouraging greater employment and productivity.¹⁹ Religion has also been shown to be more effective than secular treatment programmes in returning addicted youth to normal, productive lives.²⁰

In essence, youth who are religious make choices that have long-term positive consequences for their lives. Research from the Harvard T.S. Chan School of Public Health shows that children and youth who attend weekly religious services report greater life satisfaction and positivity in their twenties and are less likely than others to smoke, use drugs, or make poor sexual activity choices. And when youth do get sick, the research shows that youth in very religiously committed families have better skills in solving health-related problems than those whose families attend church less often.²¹

Religion’s positive effects are seen in adult’s choices as well. Religiously involved adults are less likely to commit crimes or misuse prescription drugs, and (like religiously active youth) more likely to make wise choices for positive long-term outcomes.²² Local congregations help adults cope with their adult roles and responsibilities, and provide them with the attitudes and interpersonal skills required for ‘optimal functioning with marriage and employment.’²³

An epidemiologist reports that large, well-designed longitudinal research studies have associated religious service attendance with greater longevity, less depression, less suicide, less smoking,

less substance abuse, higher survival rates of cancer and cardiovascular disease, less divorce, greater social support, greater meaning and purpose in life, greater life satisfaction, more charitable giving, more volunteering, and greater civic engagement.²⁴ Other studies add even more to this list. Compared with never attending worship services, attendance at least weekly is associated with more forgiveness, and lower probabilities of premature sexual initiation. Weekly attendance is also possibly associated with lower probabilities of post traumatic stress disorder, prescription drug misuse, and STIs. In comparison, little difference was found between less than weekly attendance and never attendance of services, except for the character outcomes. Other studies support these conclusions.²⁵

When it comes to reconciliation between marriage partners, religion has the strongest relationship with success, and sharing the *same* religious commitment between partners significantly increases the chances of that success.²⁶ It has also been found that both men and women who attend religious services regularly are less likely to commit acts of domestic violence than others. Among men, the study found that this protective effect of religion was evident only in those who are committed to the point of attending weekly.²⁷

Numerous studies report that religious attendance and/or devotion are positively related to indicators of marital quality and success—including happiness and satisfaction, adjustment, and duration²⁸—and negatively related to divorce.²⁹ Studies suggest that religion helps partners cultivate a sense of higher purpose and values centred on loving, caring for, and being sensitive to the needs of each other.³⁰ Religion stimulates spouses to become more open to

accommodation and compromise with their partners, thereby improving their conflict resolution skills.³¹ These values supplant egocentric attitudes and behaviour.³²

Places of worship are thought to help cultivate successful marriages in several ways. They limit couples' isolation through their integration into a worshipping community. In such a community, people develop confiding relationships (making it more difficult to hide abuse). Those relationships also provide social support, coping assistance, and opportunities for emotional release, potentially buffering the effects of stressors on the risk of violence. The evidence clearly shows that religious attendance is inversely associated with the perpetration of domestic violence, among both men and women.³³

Greater Opportunity

Beyond more responsible choices, churches further provide people with greater opportunities for participation and self-development they may not otherwise have had in their lives. As religion helps people better understand who they are (for example, they are someone who was lovingly created by God), people who 'occupy low-status and marginal positions in society can be reassured of their own self-worth and inspired to action.'³⁴ With a healthy self-image and sense of self-efficacy, they learn they have a place in the world and that they have the ability to contribute to it in positive, meaningful ways.

Churches can create a greater sense of personal potential by providing people with creative roles in the production of events and selection of songs to perform, as well as coaching people to be

able to perform those songs. A church environment can give people greater fulfilment and self-esteem as they participate in leadership, governance, and volunteer support roles.³⁵ People who may never have an opportunity to lead elsewhere in their lives can gain valuable experience leading programmes or serving on church boards. One study noted that a good predictor that an inner-city youth will successfully escape the ghetto is their attendance at church (as opposed to just having religious beliefs). The researcher found that attendance positively affects allocation of time, school-going, work activity, and the frequency of socially deviant behaviour.³⁶

At the Parliament of Religions held in August 2015, Ela Bhatt, Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapith University, stated that religion can particularly empower women and raise their dignity because they are disproportionately affected by poverty. Religion can unite women and give them the capacity to work together to lift themselves out of poverty. Religion is a shared community that allows women to act as a group in a way that many other organizations cannot. Because the journey to empowerment is closely intertwined with personal development within religions, the inclusion of women in religion is of great importance.³⁷

Religion has been linked positively to educational attainment, occupational achievement, work orientation, and income.³⁸ It has been found that as levels of religious socialization rise, there is a corresponding rise in educational achievement.³⁹ The importance of religion is evident in a study that found that the effect of religious values is consistently more significant than the effect of socioeconomic status when predicting both the level of student performance and changes in their grades.⁴⁰

Improved Health

A clear, strong, and consistently beneficial link between religion and health (both physical and mental) has been established by research in the health, social and behavioural sciences extending over the past one hundred years. This fact, along with an excellent overview of the literature on this topic, is provided by Linda Chatters in 'Religion and Health: Public Health Research and Practice.'⁴¹ A literature review by Lawrence Gary of Howard University suggests a number of social functions of religion that contribute to the healthy socialization experiences of religious people which, I believe it is reasonable to conclude, contributes positively to mental health. These functions include psychological affirmation, social support, identity formation, political involvement, and creativity. Religion fosters psychological wellbeing by providing a source of personal comfort and consultation, as well as offering emotional and social support through advice, material aids and services, exchanges of services, and other assistance. Social intercourse is enhanced by participation in congregational meals, sports games, sharing, rehearsals, trips, and informal gatherings. A sense of identity can be developed as the individual is linked to the past and future, and gains group values, a place in the universe, and a sense of recognition or 'somebodiness'. Political agency is enhanced through education and advocacy, while many religious traditions promote creativity through the development of spiritual music, plays, and rich and poetic teachings.⁴²

The beneficial link between religion and health applies to children as well as adults. Significant longitudinal research following children for 8 to 14 years shows that attending church weekly as a child has long-lasting benefits on mental health and other health issues.⁴³ This finding is very

relevant in Canada today, as 63% of Canadian millennials are reported to be at high risk for mental health issues, the terrible cost of which is seen in the fact that suicide is now the second-leading cause of death among Canadians 15-24 years old, second only to accidental deaths.⁴⁴

Finally, as with other age groups, empirical research suggests religion is associated with better health and well-being in adults.⁴⁵ One study showed that diastolic blood pressure for men was almost 5 mmHg lower among the group that had high religious attendance and who rated religion as highly important to themselves when compared to the non-religious group. The authors noted that a reduction of a population's mean blood pressure by as little as 2 to 4 mmHg could reduce cardiovascular disease by 10% to 20%.⁴⁶

Religion has a positive effect on physical health because religious teachings often include practices related to living a healthy lifestyle, and sometimes explicitly consider character or respect for the body as an integral part of the religion's beliefs.⁴⁷ Religious *attendance* shows the strongest relationship to good health, and religious *coping* is a prominent predictor for successful recovery and survival in clinically ill populations.⁴⁸

There is a wealth of literature all supporting the positive linkage between religiosity/spirituality and mental health.⁴⁹ In fact, one hundred studies have demonstrated positive effects of religious involvement on rates of suicide, drug use, alcohol abuse, delinquent behaviour, marital dissatisfaction, psychological distress, and depression.⁵⁰

Psychology professors Hill and Pargament note that social scientists have had limited success trying to describe the effect of religion using only psychological and social explanations. The psychology professors suggest that religion may be of an entirely different order than psycho-social factors, and rather than working indirectly through traditional psycho-social factors, religion may have its own direct effect on health. They conclude that, 'Already, there is evidence that religion and spirituality are distinctive dimensions that add unique explanatory power to the prediction of physical and mental health.'⁵¹

Sociologist Joshua Yates offers a possible reason why the social scientists have been unsuccessful in their quest for completely secular explanations. Yates speculates that perhaps one of the most significant contributions that religion makes to our mental well-being is that it helps people grapple with the possibility that tragedy in life is a fundamental, deep, and persistent feature of our human experience. He asks 'How can our governments foster a mysterious sense of our need to appreciate the fabric of our finitude? They can't,' he concludes, 'But religion can and does.'⁵² It is apparent that religion helps us make sense of our lives, leading to better mental health.

Increased Longevity

As well as improving mental and physical health, religion also increases longevity. A study of 21,000 case files from the U.S. National Health Interview Survey showed that people who never attend religious services exhibited almost twice the risk of death in the study's eight-year follow-up period when compared to the Very Committed. This translates into a seven-year difference in

life expectancy at age twenty.⁵³ The relationship between frequent religious service attendance and lower mortality risk is found even in the most rigorous studies.⁵⁴

For instance, a study by Tyler VanderWeele, professor of epidemiology at the Harvard T. S. Chan School of Public Health, using the Nurses' Health Study of 74,534 women from 1992-2012, showed that Very Committed women were 30% less likely to die in the 16-year period of his study than non-religious women. The study also showed that Very Committed women were five times less likely to commit suicide. VanderWeele found that religion increases social support, discourages smoking, decreases depression, and helps people have a more optimistic or hopeful outlook on life.⁵⁵

Economic Impact of Better Personal Outcomes

Finally, religion has a positive, measurable economic impact. The better choices and greater opportunity brought about by religion have significant benefits for the broader society.

Sociologists studying the effect of religion on human behaviour and health have estimated that the American economy benefits by about \$2.6 trillion annually – or about 1/6th of its total economic output – due to reduced welfare and social support costs, reduced incarceration and rehabilitation costs, and increased employment and productivity.⁵⁶

II. Prosocial Attitudes & Behaviours

We are reminded by Canadian researchers who published their findings between 2001 and 2014 that faith-based congregations help people to explore and cultivate deeply held beliefs; to participate in rituals of meaning; to find comfort in their times of deep pain and sorrow; and to foster relationship in community.⁵⁷ Beyond these listed benefits of being part of a faith-based congregation, there are many more direct benefits to individuals that help them in turn provide significant benefits to the public.

Good Citizens

The first benefit is the development of good citizens. Throughout history, human societies have depended on prosocial behaviour to ensure their survival. Cultures, therefore, are centred on the practices, norms, and institutions that foster prosocial attitudes and actions.⁵⁸ All institutions that develop or promote prosocial citizens provide an important public benefit, and places of worship are just such institutions.

The citizens who form Canada's civic core are those prosocial people who are caring, kind, generous, selfless, and community-oriented. They are other-centred and have a worldview that stresses responsibility and connectedness. They give, volunteer, and pursue goals that benefit local communities and the greater good beyond themselves. Canada's religiously-committed adherents share all these traits and form a vital part of Canada's civic core.⁵⁹

It must be acknowledged that religion is not *necessary* to instil prosocial attitudes and behaviours in people. Most non-religious people have prosocial attitudes and behaviours to some degree,

and there are some among the non-religious who are more prosocial than certain religious people. However, as will be shown, research on the linkage between religion and prosocial attitudes and behaviours demonstrates that Very Committed religious people, as a group, are markedly more likely to have prosocial attitudes and behaviours than non-religious people, as a group. Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has explained the relationship between religion and prosociality 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.'⁶⁰

Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow states that compassion, altruism, and charity are core tenets of the main world religions,⁶¹ especially those that are of the monotheistic tradition.⁶² Wuthnow explains that the Hebrew Scriptures teach that people are created in the image of God and are for this reason deserving of all the caring and kindness that can be given them. The Scriptures also teach that loving others is a duty we owe to God. The Koran teaches that those who give to charity guard themselves from evil. Buddhist thought, particularly in the Mayahana tradition, elevates compassion above all other virtues. And Christianity emphasizes love of neighbour, acts of mercy, and charity for the needy.⁶³

Remembering that there will always be individuals from both non-religious and religious groups who will be strongly prosocial, Canadian sociologist Kurt Bowen summarizes his research of twenty years of surveys by Statistics Canada and others, saying:

The Very Committed put a distinctively high value on the importance and quality of their relationships with others. Compared to the Non-Religious, notably more of the Very

Committed say they value a sense of belonging (69% vs. 53%), friendliness (80% vs. 63%) and kindness (85% vs. 71%). The Very Committed are even more likely to stress the importance of forgiveness (73% vs. 43%), generosity (71% vs. 42%), and concern for others (80% vs. 58%). Moreover, they are more inclined to disapprove of vengeance, to think we should forgive those who hurt us, and to believe that we ought to put our trust in others, even when we cannot be certain of reciprocation. This impressive, consistent, and cumulative set of differences suggests that the Very Committed are much more likely than other Canadians to be concerned with the welfare of others. 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.⁶⁴

Good Behaviour

Secondly, in conjunction with producing good citizens, religion contributes to good behaviour. Kurt Bowen has detected an increased 'gentleness among the Very Committed that sets them apart from other Canadians.'⁶⁵ For example, the Very Committed care about justice, but are careful to advocate in lawful ways. When it comes to protest, the Very Committed are twice as likely to support a boycott or attend a legal demonstration as the Non-Religious. But as to illegal forms of protest, only 20% of the Very Committed would join an unofficial strike or occupy a building, compared to 50% of the Non-Religious.⁶⁶

The Very Committed are law-abiding people who avoid antisocial behaviour. They are more likely than the Non-Religious to strongly agree that cheating, buying stolen goods, lying, and accepting a bribe are never justified. Across six forms of antisocial behaviour that were studied, the Very Committed are the most likely to strongly disapprove of the behaviours while the Non-Religious are the least likely to disapprove of them. Bowen concludes: 'The common thread underlying these findings on both protest and permissiveness is that religiosity is intimately linked to civility.'⁶⁷

The civility of the Very Committed extends to their close relationships. For example, the rate of marital breakdown among the Very Committed is half that of the Non-Religious (14% vs. 33%), and the Very Committed are embedded in a much more stable and extensive network of close relationships than the Non-Religious.⁶⁸ Attendance at worship services has been found to have the greatest impact on marital stability and when both spouses attend worship services regularly, they have the lowest divorce rate of all.⁶⁹ These factors add to social stability and the availability of people who can provide support to those in need, without their having to resort to a social agency.

Canadians value our international reputation for being a nation of caring, kind, generous, selfless, and community-oriented people, and this is who the Very Committed religious people are. They contribute significantly to earning that reputation for Canada. As we've noted, they tend to be other-centred, committed to working through family and other relationship problems, and are willing to sacrifice their own preferences for the greater good. The result is a strong, stable social network for families and communities that strengthens Canada's social fabric.

Giving and Volunteering

The third prosocial benefit, which is closely related to good citizenship and good behaviour, is the promotion of giving and volunteering. When it comes to practical altruism, Very Committed religious people have a distinctive commitment to giving and volunteering. Kurt Bowen notes, 'Though we overwhelmingly agree that voluntary and charitable organizations are crucial to our collective well-being, only about a third of us actually volunteer in community organizations. [...] Religiosity is one of the major social forces affecting the volunteering levels of Canadians and it is the most influential factor bar none in determining how much we give to charity.'⁷⁰

The reason the Very Committed are so much more generous than anyone else has very much to do with the religion they follow. Very Committed and Non-Religious givers do not differ in their motivation for giving: both groups embrace altruistic and humanitarian reasons for giving. But underlying the altruism and humanitarian motivations for giving to others is the fact that 74% of the Very Committed say they have a core religious motivation to give. Religious people have a basic orientation to community and concern for the welfare of others. Bowen writes that 'The inescapable conclusion is that religious motivations and high religious commitment have a profound impact on charitable giving.'⁷¹

Bowen noted that the higher giving by the Very Committed cannot be attributed to any greater privilege than the Non-Religious because their incomes and educational attainments are similar to other Canadians. At every income and educational level, the Very Committed give far more to

charity than the Less Committed, and the Non-Religious. And in fact, the greatest gap between Very Committed and Non-Religious givers occurs at the lowest income and educational levels. At the lowest levels, the Very Committed give ten times more than the Non-Religious, and at the highest levels of income and education, they still give five times more. Bowen concludes: 'The central, inescapable conclusion is that religiosity has the largest beta weight (0.336) and hence has the greatest impact on how much we Canadians give to charity.'⁷²

After an extensive review of about 550 different studies, sociologist Pamela Wiepking reports that a positive relationship between church membership and/or frequency of church attendance on the one hand and secular and religious philanthropy on the other appears in 'almost any article in which this relationship was studied.'⁷³ Wiepking then cites thirty studies as examples.

The relationship between religiosity and philanthropy has been observed the world over, including in reports and studies by Giving Australia (2005),⁷⁴ Canadians Reed and Selbee (2001),⁷⁵ Bowen (1999),⁷⁶ and Berger (2006),⁷⁷ Bekkers (2003) in The Netherlands,⁷⁸ Chang (2006) in Taiwan,⁷⁹ and Reitsma, Scheepers, and Grotenhuis (2003) in Western Europe.⁸⁰ Research on individual religious giving includes studies by Finke, Bahr, and Scheitle,⁸¹ Hoge,⁸² Donahue,⁸³ Hoge, Zech, McNamara, and Donohue,⁸⁴ Wuthnow,⁸⁵ Chaves and Miller,⁸⁶ and an entire issue of Review of Religious Research.⁸⁷

A Taiwanese study found such positive benefits from religion that it recommended increasing the tax breaks for donations to religious organizations to encourage greater participation in religious activities.⁸⁸

The biggest impact on the amount donated to charity as adults was having been active in a religious organization as a youth. Youths who were active in a church gave more than double to charity as adults than did adults who were not active in a religious organization as youths.⁸⁹

A 2018 study by Imagine Canada found that 91% of people who attended a place of worship at least once a week were donors, virtually the same percentage (90%) as those who attended monthly. Where they differed though, was in how much they gave. Forty-seven percent of weekly attenders are in the top 25% of all givers in Canada, giving an annual average of \$1,284, while only 28% of the monthly attenders were in the top 25% of Canadian donors.⁹⁰ There really is something distinctive about weekly attenders.

Turning our attention to the Non-Religious, the effect on philanthropy of having no religion is that all the numbers are markedly lower. Only 76% of the Non-Religious are donors, they give a yearly average of only \$313, and only 12% of them are in the top 25% of Canadian donors.⁹¹ The weekly attenders mentioned previously really are Canada's superstar donors. But their generosity doesn't happen spontaneously.

It turns out that the Very Committed tend to plan their giving in advance as part of their religious responsibility to care for others, often deciding to give a percentage of their income each week.⁹² Those who plan their giving as a fixed percentage of their income give an average of 3% more of their income to religious and non-religious charities than those who do not plan their giving in advance.⁹³

In addition, Statistics Canada has shown that as of 2004, the 19% of Canadians who are Very Committed fund 74% of all donations to religious charities and more than 20% of all donations to secular charities.⁹⁴ This is true in the United States as well.⁹⁵

Indeed, it is not only religious charities that benefit from the liberality of the Very Committed. Canadian social surveys reveal that the Very Committed give more to secular charities than do the Non Religious or, indeed, anyone else. Bowen reports that the median donation by the Very Committed to secular charities is almost double that of the Non-Religious. The one-third of Canadians who were religious (the Very Committed and the Less Committed) together provided more than 40% of all the funds raised by secular charities, while the 40% of the population who were non-religious gave only 30% of the donations received by secular charities.⁹⁶ (Other Canadians fit into the 'seeker' or 'spiritual' part of the religiosity scale.) When a non-religious person receives assistance from a secular charity, they benefit from the gifts of time and money made by religious people who learned to be generous in their places of worship. The fact is, religious Canadians give sacrificially to ensure that secular goals for the common good are achieved.

According to Bowen, if everyone gave like the Very Committed give, the total value (at the time) of all charitable donations would rise from \$5 billion to \$12 billion. He said, 'Without the Very Committed, all Canadians and our network of charities and non-profit organizations would be much diminished.'⁹⁷ Religious ideals inspire generosity that is much greater than it otherwise would be.

As with charitable giving, survey results show that a core group of individuals provide most of the hours volunteered. Roughly 10% of Canadians account for more than 75% of all volunteer hours. 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 organizations than the Non-Religious do (35% to 25%).⁹⁸

As the evidence shows, Advancing Religion leads directly to a strong charitable sector that cares for citizens in need.

III. Tangible Community Benefits

Not only do religious people contribute to Canadian society as individuals, but most, if not all, religions have a very strong communal aspect. I conclude from the evidence that many benefits accrue to all Canadians because places of worship *create synergy* as individual members live out their faith together and accomplish something much greater together through their places of worship than they could achieve on their own.

A significant body of academic work has profiled the economic impact of religion as a communal phenomenon, the value of social capital generated by the religiously inspired, the religious contribution to mutual and humanitarian service, and more.⁹⁹ This section considers the socio-economic benefits of the communities that gather in places of worship.

Places of worship benefit their local communities through four means, each of which will be canvassed in greater detail below:

1. A positive contribution of social capital
2. A multiplier effect (the 'Halo Effect') that produces benefits far greater than their budgets
3. An exceptionally high return on society's investment through the tax system
4. An improvement in the area's Neighbourhood Viability Index

Positive Social Capital

An Imagine Canada report contains this summary statement about religious organizations and their communities:

Religious organizations are more likely than other nonprofit and voluntary organizations to have a local community focus. Often at the heart of their communities, religious organizations can act as a point of initial contact for people new to a neighbourhood.

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.

In fact, more than two-thirds of religious organizations say that both members and non-members benefit from their services.¹⁰⁰

A study of forty-six Ontario churches supports what Imagine Canada reported. The study concluded that non-members were four times more likely to use a church's community programmes than the church members were.¹⁰¹

Congregations provide an accessible environment that is rich in opportunities to build bonding social capital (relationships within a group). Drawing on survey work by others, a research team reports that people trust other people in their place of worship more than they trust co-workers, neighbours, and people of their own race. Attending or joining a place of worship therefore hastens the formation of trust and bonding social capital.¹⁰² They also found that participating in volunteer activities within a place of worship, whether serving internal needs of the organization or reaching out to and serving the public, builds bridging capital (relationships between groups) with the surrounding community and increases volunteering externally and civic participation.

Many places of worship connect with outside groups and support their programmes, often providing them with use of their building space. Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist at Boston University, studied congregational life in the United States. She writes:

Everywhere you look among the congregations we interviewed, there are scout troops and nursery schools, senior centers and sports leagues – all existing independently of any single congregation, but often housed and supported by religious groups in cooperation with others in the community. In addition, there are arts organizations that use religious buildings for rehearsals, performances and lessons. Congregations support formal and informal programs of tutoring, after-school care, and literacy classes. They contribute to

programs of education and service provision that surround issues as diverse as AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, handicapped persons, adoption, and more. They support and refer parishioners to counseling centers of all sorts. And they cooperate with others in delivering spiritual care to people in hospitals, nursing homes, on college campuses, and even in police and fire departments.¹⁰³

Ammerman observes 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.’¹⁰⁴

Canadian and American research both show that local churches are truly a blessing to their surrounding communities, not only spiritually, but also socially and economically. In *American Grace*, Robert Putnam noted that religious people make good neighbours, commenting: ‘Good neighborliness and involvement in religiously based social networks are highly correlated in every survey we have examined, even when we hold constant everything from demographic and ideological factors to general religiosity and general sociability.’¹⁰⁵

Another contribution congregations make to their neighbourhood’s social capital is that they serve as important links in the delivery of the services and activities of other organizations that make their communities a better place in which to live.¹⁰⁶

The ‘Halo Effect’

In addition to social capital, a second tangible community benefit can be found in the 'Halo Effect'. This phenomenon was illustrated by a Canadian research study called *The Halo Project*, which analysed places of worship in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) representing different religious traditions. The project was jointly supported by the City of Toronto's Research and Analysis Unit, Toronto Parks and Recreation, and Toronto Water, along with other organizations including the Canadian Council of Christian Charities, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and Cardus. The study examined ten places of worship in the City of Toronto and determined the difference between what a place of worship spends and the higher value that it provides to its local community. The difference is referred to as the 'Halo Effect.' The researchers used the same principles to calculate the benefit provided to the community as are used when analysts calculate the benefits of hosting world events in Canada. The Halo Effect of having a place of worship in a large urban community is almost 5 times its annual budget.¹⁰⁷

A follow-up study included 26 congregations in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec, including four rural or small-town communities. The Halo Effect for this group was less than in the GTA but still three times their annual budgets. When these results are applied to all the religious congregations in Canada, they produce an annual benefit of about \$17.5 billion, equivalent to 1.1% of the GDP.¹⁰⁸

A third study by Michael Daly was done of four churches in Ontario: one small-town church and three rural churches (Parry Sound, Auburn, South Mountain, and Southampton). Although they made a lesser economic contribution than the big-city congregations, the small-town/rural churches still made a significant contribution to their communities and, in fact, outperformed the

big cities almost 3:1 in the value of the ‘social capital and care’ they contributed to their communities.¹⁰⁹

These three studies of the economic impact of local places of worship on their communities round out several other studies in recent years, both in Canada and in the United States, that have reviewed the contributions that faith communities or local religious congregations make to the cultural, spiritual and social lives of their surrounding neighbourhoods, which also found positive results.¹¹⁰

So, large and small, urban and rural, local congregations have a significant effect on the quality of life in their communities.

Religion’s Return on Investment

Third, religion offers a meaningful return on investment. Advancing Religion as a head of charity provides an outstanding tangible return on investment (ROI) to Canada. Some people feel that public support for religious charities through tax concessions given to places of worship is unfair, as non-religious people are thereby supporting religious charities through the tax system. These objections can be properly assessed by doing a cost/benefit analysis that considers both the cost of the tax concessions and the significant benefits identified by *The Halo Project*.

A 2017 analysis of 16 congregations calculated an ROI for places of worship. It calculated the total amount of ‘lost’ taxes in terms of municipal property tax, provincial and federal sales tax,

and the provincial and federal personal income tax credit for receipted donations. The amount was then compared to the socioeconomic benefit contributed by those congregations, and the result was a return on investment that is twelve times higher than the 'lost' taxes.¹¹¹ The fact is, those taxes are not lost but are invested, and Canada's investment in religious charities through the tax system provides an outstanding return on investment to all taxpayers, reducing the burden taxpayers would otherwise have to pay to obtain equivalent benefits for the public.

Neighbourhood Viability Index

Fourth, religion is an important indicator when it comes to neighbourhood viability. When a place of worship closes, the neighbourhood suffers. Two political scientists looked at the effect of a church closing on its surrounding community using a Neighbourhood Viability Index, which measures the neighbourhood's well-being in terms of residential tenure, home ownership, educational attainment, and other similar factors. They were concerned that neighbourhoods in major metropolitan areas that experience decline and disinvestment would be adversely affected by the closure of places of worship. They report that places of worship are often regarded as important social actors because they are typically the last community group to leave a neighbourhood.

They found that for each closure of a geographically oriented congregation (e.g., Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Orthodox Jewish), there is a corresponding decrease in neighbourhood viability over the following decade of 10% for departing Roman Catholic churches and 7.5% for the others. They also found that for each closure of a congregation characterized by bridging

capital (i.e., the church is involved in social concerns beyond the congregation and active in its neighbourhood), there is a corresponding decrease in neighbourhood viability over the following decade of 2.5%. The authors conclude that the presence of a place of worship contributes positively to a neighbourhood's viability and that congregational closures often lead to the socio-economic collapse of their neighbourhoods.¹¹²

A good example is the closure of St Matthias Anglican Parish in Guelph, Ontario. Michael Wood Daly recounts that:

Guelph Planning Department officials as well as some City Councillors have expressed concern about the City's capacity to replace programs and services once offered by the church. Even in the short time the congregation has been closed, the community has gone lacking and the City has been unable to allocate sufficient resources to replace those programs and services that have been lost.¹¹³

IV. Benefits for the Public At Large

The following benefits accrue to society as a whole as opposed to individuals: other-centredness, civic engagement, early intervention and recovery, improved availability of community services, foundational freedom, pluralism, public discourse, economic growth, and support for government policy.

Other-centredness

The positive impact of religion on the public was observed in the early 19th century by Alexis de Tocqueville, who argued that religious values were the impetus that moved people away from self-interest and toward civic engagement.¹¹⁴ Tocqueville's observation is highly relevant because social scientists are concerned that today's individualism is undermining civic engagement.¹¹⁵ Religion (especially worship) reminds people that they are not the 'centre of the universe' and that they are responsible for supporting the greater good.¹¹⁶ It is a powerful corrective to individualism's negative consequences and promotes a kind and caring society by helping people learn how to communicate better and trust one another.¹¹⁷

Civic Engagement

There are several definitions of 'civic engagement,' but the one that seems most appropriate for this topic refers to a person who is 'working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities [...] promoting the quality of life in a community.'¹¹⁸ People who have prosocial characteristics are the most likely to engage this way and, as we have seen above and will discuss further below, religion is the most significant mechanism our society has that develops prosocial attitudes and behaviour.

It is no surprise, then, that two Canadian academics who noted a trend in declining civic engagement since 1945 linked that decline to waning church attendance.¹¹⁹ They report that

membership in organizations that serve others (churches, service clubs, Scouts) is down while membership in organizations that serve their own members (sports, arts) is up.

They explain that civic engagement and church attendance are linked because, in addition to instilling prosocial attitudes and behaviours, the local church used to be where people learned to become civically engaged; it was there that they learned to speak in public, run meetings, respectfully engage those with different viewpoints, and understand the needs of their local community. A local church equipped people to be change agents in their community. If a nation wants its citizens to be civically engaged, a flourishing religious subculture is an easy way to achieve that goal.

A Social Buffer

Places of worship are ‘recognized as therapeutic communities and resources for both the prevention and amelioration of mental and physical health problems.’¹²⁰ Religious congregations transfer an overall benefit to society through the congregation’s healthy social capital and capacity for self-care as each religious community cares for its own and for those who come to it for assistance. (When personal problems arise, people are more likely to seek assistance from a member of the clergy than from a mental health professional.)¹²¹ In some cases, early intervention and support may prevent problems from worsening and becoming more costly for society, and in other cases congregational support may augment public, social and medical services and speed recovery or resolution, again minimizing the cost to society.

The nature of religion is that it deals with deeply personal issues. There is an expectation of shared intimacy between people that permits them to discuss aspects of their lives they might not be willing to share elsewhere. People can receive advice and encouragement from others that helps them deal with life's issues, perhaps settling things without needing to resort to public support services.

Nancy Ammerman found that as congregational members care for each other 'through thick and thin,' they 'pick up much of the first-line social service delivery that might otherwise have to be done by government agencies.'¹²²

In this way, places of worship act as a kind of buffer between the state's support services and the public's needs. Whether it be additional support through medical treatments or longer-term health issues, or dealing with dysfunctional relationships, poverty or addictions, religious communities are often part of the solution.

Improved Availability of Community Services

Indeed, the impact of a religious community's support for those in need can be significant. Researchers have documented that not only does religion increase the supply of community services, it also reduces the demand for them.

As an example, one study of more than 500 admissions to Duke University Medical Center found that patients who attended church weekly or more often were significantly less likely to

have been admitted to the hospital in the previous year; more likely to have had fewer hospital admissions overall; and more likely to have spent fewer days in the hospital than those who attended less often (11 days compared to 28 days). These associations retained their significance after controlling for other factors. The study's authors believe that attendance at church worship services results in less burden on public resources, such as health care, in part because of the support network that religious communities provide.¹²³

The benefits of religion reduce the demand for government and community services and, therefore, increase the availability of those services for the non-religious public.

Foundational Freedom for Liberal Democracy

Canadian society further benefits from the free practice and expression of religious belief because religion and religious freedom are foundational to the other freedoms that are characteristic of liberal democracies. To curtail religious freedom is to compromise the basic liberty of the nation. As Thomas Farr of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs asserts:

Any state that protects religious liberty thereby limits itself. Religious liberty empowers religious actors both to perform services that might otherwise be carried out by the state, and to adhere to an authority beyond the state. For this very reason, authoritarian governments might understandably permit some secular assembly and speech, while banning or restricting religious assembly and speech. Such has been a pattern throughout

history – from Stalin, Mao and Hitler, to Mexico’s Plutarco Calles and Syria’s Bashar Assad.¹²⁴

Derek B.M. Ross, Executive Director of Christian Legal Fellowship, agrees with Farr’s point about authoritarian governments. He writes, ‘Religion is beneficial to the public because it nurtures independent thought, outside of the machinery of the state.’¹²⁵

Farr reports that sociologists Brian Grim and Roger Finke have shown high statistical correlations between religious liberty and the presence of the other fundamental freedoms that ensure the longevity of democracy, including civil and political liberty, freedom of the press, and economic freedom. Grim and Finke also found that religious freedom is highly associated with overall human development, and the absence of violent religious extremism.¹²⁶

Former Chief Justice Dickson of the Supreme Court of Canada reflected this same idea when he stated in *R v Big M Drug Mart* that ‘an emphasis on individual conscience and individual judgment [...] lies at the heart of our democratic political tradition [...] Religious belief and practice are historically prototypical’.¹²⁷ That is to say, religious freedom blazed the trail for many other freedoms including freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and consequently of the press.¹²⁸

It is good for everyone that our society encourages the institutions that bring people of faith together for a public, communal expression of their faith. That they can do this is a demonstration that they live in a free and democratic society. This is why the European Court of

Human Rights stressed that the autonomous existence of religious communities is indispensable for pluralism in a democratic society – a position that has been adopted by the Supreme Court of Canada.¹²⁹

Contribution to a Pluralistic Culture

Writing for the World Economic Forum, Brian Grim (President of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation) and Jo-Ann Lyon (General Superintendent of the Wesleyan Church) argue that religious freedom allows minority groups, including women, to have a voice in and contribute to society, making it a more pluralistic culture. They report research by the Pew Foundation that found a correlation between higher restrictions on religious freedom and greater gender inequality across countries in all five major continents. Their conclusion is that ‘To close the gender gap, strengthen economies and empower women, it is imperative that religious freedom become a factor that is taken seriously and acted upon.’¹³⁰

The law has recognised that there is a public benefit even when religious charities are closed to the public. Although most places of worship are open to the public, an English judge ruled that there is public benefit even in a synagogue that is not open to the public because it allows persons to ‘mix with their fellow citizens.’¹³¹ The judge recognised that places of worship provide a useful service to the broader community by helping to preserve and advance minority cultures and ethnicities, thus increasing pluralism.

The black church in America is a good example of this type of public benefit. While enforced segregation is deplorable, the development of black churches in the United States gave the black population an institution that preserved their culture and provided a community hub in which black culture could continue to develop. It served as the centre of activism and community organization, and as a voice for the community in the wider society. Dr Peniel Joseph, founding director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy, notes that black churches published newspapers; raised money to build schools and colleges; and helped organize libraries, insurance companies, and anti-poverty efforts. Joseph writes that historically, black churches helped sustain black communities against the ravages of Jim Crow, poverty, and racial violence that shaped African-American life during a very difficult period in history.¹³²

Religion and Women

Special mention should be made of how religion has led to the development and empowerment of people to maximize their human potential. Society benefits when everyone is able to contribute for the good of all from their own experience, education, talents, and other personal attributes. A good example of how religion can empower people and promote pluralism is the promotion of women's rights and opportunities across a variety of religious traditions.

Indeed, in a written statement to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the Bahá'í International Community stated that in the treatment of women, '[f]oremost is the principle of the oneness of humankind. It lies at the heart of the exhortation that we should

treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated, an ethical standard upheld in some form by every religion.’¹³³

Religious leaders of different faiths are currently making diligent efforts to advance women’s rights in Ethiopia.¹³⁴ In 2016, religious leaders developed a 13-point call for action to end harmful traditional practices and gender-based violence in Ethiopia, including rejecting violence against women, child marriage, and the practice of FGM (female genital mutilation). They are now preaching to prevent such violence in their congregations. UN Women Ethiopia Deputy Representative Funmi Bologun explains:

Religious leaders are fundamental allies in driving the advancement of women’s rights in Ethiopian society. [...] Where patriarchal traditions and cultural practices condone discrimination against women, true interpretation of religion has the power to break the barriers and unlock human potential. Programmes such as this [a UN training initiative involving religious leaders], aiming to build the capacity of religious leaders on women’s rights, are critical in order to reduce the social acceptance of violence against women and to change discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.¹³⁵

Similarly, Nicholas Kristof, a columnist for the New York Times, describes how religion is improving the lives of women in Africa. Though not unequivocal in his commendation, Kristof praises the positive contributions of ‘conservative [churches] led by evangelicals’. He notes that Pentecostal congregations in particular ‘encourage women to take leadership roles, and for many women this is the first time they have been trusted with authority and found their opinions

respected. In rural Africa, Pentecostal churches are becoming a significant force to emancipate women.’¹³⁶

In 2016, in an event organized by UN Women Myanmar, prominent leaders of four religions (Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu) gathered to jointly state that no religion justifies discrimination or violence against women. Al Haj U Aye Lwin, Chief Convener of the Islamic Centre of Myanmar, claimed that it is not religion that teaches discrimination, but its (mis)interpretation. According to Hla Tun, Coordinator of Sanatan Dharma Swayamsevak Sangh, the empowerment of women empowers the community as a whole in its social and economic development. Jean D’Cunha, Head of UN Women Myanmar, spoke of the power of faith to effect change and stressed that discrimination and violence against women is not just a women’s issue but one that also hurts other members of society and a country’s overall development. ‘Religious leaders with their strategic reach and influence, together with women and men laity, can draw on the transformative potential of religion to end discrimination and violence against women and girls and foster genuine peace and harmony,’ she said. ‘For religion speaks to the core of our beings, and inspires our meaning systems and relationships, including relationships of gender justice and equality.’¹³⁷

Manini Sheker, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Sussex, agrees about the transformative power of religion. She says, ‘From the mass mobilization of Christian women to end fourteen years of civil war in Liberia to the founding of Islam-inspired grassroots organizations to advance women’s empowerment and civic dialogue in Bosnia-Herzegovina, faith-inspired movements are playing a critical role in safeguarding women’s rights.’¹³⁸

Contribution to Public Discourse

Legal scholar Kathleen Brady notes that religious groups play a prophetic role and help the broader society when they develop and communicate new ideas that contribute to the common good of the whole society and push the larger community forward.¹³⁹ For example, the now mainstream Canadian values of equality and human dignity were developed from the Christian theology that all humans are created in the image of God.¹⁴⁰ Religion promotes its values of freedom of conscience, justice, and mercy for the good of all. Brady reminds us that:

Religious groups speak to us not only about the divine but also about the social and civic concerns of the larger community, and our collective progress depends upon the range of insights that different traditions provide... Indeed, religious groups do more than speak to us about social and political truth. Religious communities seek to live out their social visions in their internal community life, and it is in this form of witness that the power of new ideas may be most evident. Religious groups not only speak a prophetic word, but they model it in their internal life.¹⁴¹

Erin Wilson, Director of the Centre for Religion, Conflict, and the Public Domain at the University of Groningen, recognises that people who have identified as religious, such as Martin Luther King Jr., have led movements for inclusion. Likewise, religious development organizations such as World Vision International have developed training programmes to

promote gender equality and to reduce gender-based violence. They are examples of the good that religion can do for society.¹⁴²

Effects on Business and the Economy

It is also worth noting that the presence of religion in a society constructively impacts business practices and economic growth. Sociologist Joshua Yates reports that ‘a credible body of academic work has profiled the economic impact of religion and more.’¹⁴³

Religious freedom is a key ingredient to peace and stability, which is particularly important for business because where stability exists, there are more opportunities to invest and to conduct normal and predictable business operations, especially in emerging and new markets.¹⁴⁴ One study found that the presence of proselytizing Protestant faiths – that is, faiths competing for adherents – was associated with economic development throughout the world.¹⁴⁵ A notable finding of a study of 143 countries is that ‘religious freedom—taken as the inverse of religious restrictions and hostilities—is one of only three variables that remains a significant predictor of GDP growth.’ The study found that religious freedom is correlated with economic global competitiveness.¹⁴⁶

In a series of studies in China, Xingqiang Du and colleagues used a sample of 11,357 observations of business valuations from the Chinese stock market for the period of 2001–2011 and found ‘strong and robust’ evidence to show that religion is significantly negatively associated with the extent of ‘earnings management,’ suggesting that religion can serve as a set

of social norms to mitigate corporate unethical behaviour. The proximity of a business to places of worship (e.g., Buddhist monasteries, Taoist temples) predicted benefits in terms of greater environmental responsibility and philanthropic giving, as well as a reduction of illegal business practices. Their results mirrored the findings of other studies.¹⁴⁷

Other Chinese research looked at provincial data from 2001 to 2011 to study the impact of religion on economic growth. The authors connect religion to the economy through religion's influence on political preference, quality of governance, human capital, education, and work ethic. They report that 'among the different religions, Christianity has the most significant effect on economic growth. This conclusion is consistent among different estimators and robust with stability over time.'¹⁴⁸ Here is an indication that at least one religion definitely influences the national economy. The authors don't rule out that other religions may have a similar effect; they just can't make a positive declaration on that matter.

Finally, as a support to the business community and economic success, eight of ten recent studies have found a generally positive relationship between religiousness and ethical decision-making¹⁴⁹ and three studies suggest that organized religion helps to improve government stability by increasing social capital and stimulating economic growth.¹⁵⁰

Support for Government Policy

Another major benefit to the public at large is that religious support networks augment government programmes, such as receiving refugees. Statistics Canada reported that in 2011

there were 7,400 government-assisted refugees, and in addition, another 5,500 refugees were supported by private groups which, according to Statistics Canada, were mostly Christian churches.¹⁵¹ In fact, a newspaper reported that churches dominate the roster of 100 organizations pre-approved by the federal government to work with refugees. The article stated that with determined volunteers and a built-in donation base, faith-based organizations are well-suited for refugee work.¹⁵²

Faith-based sponsors tend to sponsor marginalized people who might be overlooked by the government's refugee programme. For example, ninety percent of the Syrian refugees who came to Canada through private sponsorship (mostly by Christian churches and individual Christians) were from vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities, while only 5% of those sponsored by the federal government came from those minorities. One Christian group, Hay Doun of Montreal, alone sponsored 25% of all Syrian refugees arriving since 2013, continuing a service it had already been providing for ten years as they sponsored both Christians and Muslims alike.¹⁵³

Once refugees arrive in Canada, government studies show that privately sponsored refugees tend to fare better than their government counterparts.¹⁵⁴

More broadly, a Canadian survey showed that half of new Canadians receive material support, help finding a job, and new language instruction from faith-based communities, and more than 60% rely on those same groups to form a community and relational network after they arrive in Canada.¹⁵⁵

A study of 500 first generation immigrants to the United States found that they made good use of ethnic religious congregations, quickly building trust with their co-attendees (as reported above, people trust fellow believers at their place of worship more than they do others) and developing social networks in those congregations. The study shows that volunteering within the congregation is significantly related to civic engagement and that participating in volunteer activities, as opposed to simply attending, is associated with volunteering outside the congregation and civic participation. Volunteering within a place of worship helps immigrants not only build bonding capital but also bridging capital and is thus very helpful in integrating new immigrants into their new host community.¹⁵⁶

Why Religion ‘Works’

As sociologist Joshua Yates wrote, we can measure inputs and outputs, as we have done throughout this chapter, but the real question of great interest is the idea of formation and how religious communities shape people so they develop characteristics and practices that yield public benefit. He asks, ‘How are these communities forming people into valued neighbours, community leaders, active citizens, and in some cases, tireless advocates? The relationship of all these dynamics has been significantly underexamined.’¹⁵⁷

Religion is Comprehensive

A starting point to understanding religion’s effect on people is its comprehensive nature.

Religion is a single system than encompasses all of life. Psychologists have noted that ‘To most

believers, religion appears as a total ideology with a sense of the “natural” and the “real”, without which it is impossible to conceive the world they inhabit.’¹⁵⁸

Religion Provides Strong Motivation

The secular concept of altruism describes the scenario when a person does something of benefit for someone else without any discernible benefit in return. But it does not explain *why* people do altruistic deeds. Some see altruism as irrational, and some say it doesn’t really exist. Even believers in altruism concede that it is comparatively rare. Civil communities can create the mechanisms for altruism and encourage it, but they don’t have the ability to teach altruism and create within people an intrinsic norm of altruism.

Religious communities are different; they are communities in which norms are not just taught, but also internalized. Religion supplies the *why* for altruistic behaviour.¹⁵⁹ In fact, religion is so powerful because it isn’t just about attending a worship service. Ninety-four percent of religiously committed Canadians say they draw their personal identity from their faith and religious belief. Religion is both an identity and a worldview.¹⁶⁰ While most studies use weekly attendance at a worship service as a proxy for religiosity, it appears that the importance of a person’s religion to them and the internalization of that religion are the real factors in the difference between the Very Committed and the Non-Religious. High levels of personal devotion are associated with friendlier and more cooperative interactions with others, including higher levels of listening, more control of disappointment, and more control of anger.¹⁶¹

Religion Shapes Identity

To the extent that individuals are involved in a place of worship or a religious belief system, a socializing influence is exerted upon them.¹⁶² Even singing in the choir has a positive effect on people, as they work together to perfect a song and then through the song, proclaim a shared religious value or norm.¹⁶³ Church-sponsored young adult groups support positive socialization by helping people to develop social skills and to reaffirm their self and group identity.¹⁶⁴ Those who rank religion as a major part of their identity are more likely to use their religion to find meaning in their daily lives,¹⁶⁵ and thus are more likely to produce its benefits in the world around them.

The 'secret sauce' of religion is that adherents believe there is a Higher Power, gods, or God that is external to themselves. Religious people understand that the world does not revolve around them, but that they are part of something bigger than themselves. Their fundamental worldview is that 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.

Two sociologists from the University of Akron and a professor of medical humanities at Stony Brook University wrote a book called *Habits of the Heart*.¹⁶⁶ Their research found experiencing God's love directly was the only variable that significantly predicted a benevolent person.¹⁶⁷ Within the Very Committed, those who experience divine love most frequently are the most benevolent people of all. They are the most likely to agree that 'all people share an unbreakable

bond of humanity.’ Only 39% of people who do not feel God’s love directly strongly agree with the statement that they should contribute to making the world a better place, while 65% of those who most frequently and directly experience God’s love strongly agree with that statement.¹⁶⁸

Places of Worship Have Self-Reinforcing Social Networks

Regular attendees at worship services enjoy larger in-person social networks and more frequent in-person social contacts than any other persons.¹⁶⁹ Religious groups promote informal exchanges of tangible support and socioemotional support.¹⁷⁰ They also offer pastoral counselling, formal programmes for learning life skills, and other practical supports.¹⁷¹ Regular attendees report receiving more social support than others, on average, and are more likely to perceive their support networks as reliable and satisfying.¹⁷²

Places of Worship Drive Behaviour

The reason religiosity is so crucial is that good intentions, beliefs, and attitudes alone are not enough to drive behaviour.¹⁷³ Believing it is important to care for others is only weakly correlated with caring behaviour. What matters more are habits and practices accumulated over time and then activated by circumstances that cue caring behaviour. Prosocial behaviours are taught, modelled, and practised in a mutually reinforcing community environment located within local places of worship where caring behaviours are observed in others, needs are highlighted, opportunities to act are presented, and relational networks reinforce prosocial behaviour. The religious doctrines of responsibility for one’s neighbour, of valuing each person as God’s

creation regardless of social status, and of self-sacrifice for the greater good work together with the practices learned by participating in the congregation's religious programmes to drive the prosocial concern for the welfare of others to tangible action. Practising one's religion is the mechanism that converts attitudes and beliefs into habits and regular practices.¹⁷⁴

A group of researchers from University of Notre Dame's Department of Sociology came up with a helpful metaphor for places of worship when they noted that congregations function as *schools* for learning formative skills and values that are conducive to philanthropic behaviour.¹⁷⁵

Places of Worship Build Strong Family Bonds

The more religious a couple is, the closer their children feel to them and the more the children describe their homes as happy, warm, accepting, and communicative. Family solidarity is positively linked to the frequency of attendance of high school students at religious services.¹⁷⁶

Religion promotes the idea that positive relationships among family members are desirable. Most religions encourage marriage, procreation, and loving relationships within the family; they also provide parent-child interactive activities such as family camp or retreats that facilitate bonding between them, and give opportunities to discuss religious teachings and family issues.¹⁷⁷

Simply put, shared religiosity promotes strong spousal and familial ties and has significant positive effects on the quality of parent-child relationships, including the level of a father's involvement with his children, whether married or divorced, and the father's spending time

monitoring his children, praising and hugging them, and simply being with them.¹⁷⁸ As previously noted, loving, supportive relationships within a family equip children and youth to make better choices and form better habits, and then to continue them into adulthood.

Places of Worship are Coherent and Cohesive

A place of worship combines in one cohesive environment a coherent package in which all elements work together to achieve their intended result. Sermons are reinforced with opportunities to act on them. Many congregations have a small group programmes in which congregational members meet in groups of about ten people to build strong relationships between them and give them opportunity to discuss their faith and its application in life. Values are discussed and modelled in community for both children and adults. As noted previously, people who occupy low-status and marginal positions in society are reassured of their self-worth and their intrinsic ability to contribute to the public good.¹⁷⁹

Religion is Unique in How it Works

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 (which might be replicated without religion) or are the product of the practices working synergistically together. His description of how the practice of religion works as a single, holistic, comprehensive system is a great explanation of what makes religion so effective at producing prosocial people who do great 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 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.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

Carl Juneau, with more than 28 years' experience in the regulation of charities through the Canada Revenue Agency's Charities Directorate and the Tax Policy Branch of the federal Department of Finance, wrote about the public benefit of Advancing Religion saying:

Beyond faith, [religion] has taught us to respect human life; it has taught us to respect property; it has taught us to respect God's creation; it has taught us to abhor violence; it has taught us to help one another; it has taught us honesty. In essence, what makes religion

‘good’ from a societal point of view is that it makes us want to become better – it makes people become better members of society.¹⁸¹

Juneau’s assessment points to a final benefit of Advancing Religion: it makes us want to become better people and it shows us how. In an ideal world, all people of faith would become outstanding paragons of virtue, but in the real world faith communities do not claim that each and every adherent of their faith will manifest the beneficial effects of their religion, because people are inevitably fallible.¹⁸² Nevertheless, the positive effect over time that religious organizations have on individuals has been proven by impartial academic research and is a tremendous public benefit for Canada.¹⁸³

As law professor Matthew Harding declares, there is ‘most clearly an argument for applying a presumption of benefit to religions that have enriched the lives of large numbers of adherents over long periods of time.’¹⁸⁴ Likewise, Canada’s federal Minister of Finance wrote to the Canadian Secular Alliance in 2012 about the presumed benefit of Advancing Religion, arguing that ‘providing charitable status for the advancement of religion is based on the presumption that religion provides people with a moral and ethical framework for living and plays an important role in building social cohesion.’¹⁸⁵

Based on the research reported in this chapter, it is reasonable to conclude that the presumption of benefit is well-founded.

The charitable purpose of Advancing Religion benefits the Canadian public, both individuals and communities, and it benefits our nation by increasing civic engagement, economic output, and social infrastructure. Advancing Religion does all this by producing citizens who bolster our international reputation for civility, generosity, and kindness.

* MBA, DMin, CEO, Canadian Council of Christian Charities.

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¹⁰ Seekers who never attend a worship service may be called 'Spiritual' in some studies because they are not seeking an organized religious experience.

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