OVERVIEW

After spending 14 months in Scandinavia discussing religion with Danes and Swedes, sociologist Phil Zuckerman wonders whether or not religion impacts the health of a society. Mr. Zuckerman asserts, “Denmark and Sweden are among the least religious nations in the world… It is also well known that in various rankings of nations by life expectancy, child welfare, literacy, schooling, economic equality, standard of living and competitiveness, Denmark and Sweden stand in the first tier.”

Many spiritual people believe religious belief bolsters the decency and general strength of a society. Religion provides society with a moral compass, a reason for succeeding and a plan for meaningful prosperity. But how true is this thinking?

Zuckerman insists “[the Scandinavian] society — a markedly irreligious society — [is], above all, moral, stable, humane and deeply good.” Though many of his interviewees knew very little or nothing about their nominal Christianity, many respondents consider themselves Christians. Many of them are members of the Danish National Church or the Church of Sweden. One person who was interviewed called Christianity “nice”. Christianity and its Bible are nice thoughts: Jesus was a nice man with good ideas everyone should espouse.

According to one pastor, “the word ‘God’ is one of the most embarrassing words you can say [in Denmark]. You would rather go naked through the city than talk about God.” Zuckerman tells another story of a “man [who] recounted the shock he felt when a colleague, after a few drinks, confessed to believing in God. ‘I hope you don’t feel I’m a bad person,’ the colleague pleaded.” Interestingly, none of the people Phil Zuckerman spoke to were willing to label themselves “atheists”.

The author of the New York Times article, Peter Steinfels wants to know if Zuckerman’s findings are an indication that religion is a personal issue for Danes and Swedes. Zuckerman’s response: “I spent a year scratching. I scratched and I scratched and I scratched and concluded that religion wasn’t really so much a private, personal issue, but rather, a non-issue.”

It seems Danes and Swedes are willing to formally associate themselves with the Church while daily resisting their espoused religion. Mr. Phil Zuckerman asserts that Danes and Swedes are more comfortable with skirting the issue of religion than discussing it openly, and that this approach to religion has helped Scandinavia. Perhaps the economies of other countries would be helped by ignoring religion?

Phil Zuckerman's book Society without God contains more information about his research. YouTube hosts a video which records an interview of Phil Zuckerman.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What impresses you most about this article? What questions does it raise in your mind? Do you want to know more about this issue? Where could you find such information?
2. What do you think about Phil Zuckerman’s findings?

3. What do you think motivated Phil Zuckerman to produce this study?

4. What does Peter Steinfels (the author) want your reaction to be? What does Mr. Zuckerman (the researcher) want your reaction to be?

5. How important do you think Christianity is to Americans?

6. Why do you think Denmark and Sweden are seemingly upright societies?

IMPLICATIONS

1. It is apparent that some believe Christianity has no bearing on the life and health of a society; Christianity is just sentimentality.

2. These findings should be discussed, should encourage us to understand the motivation behind this story (and the implications of that motivation), and should drive us to evaluate our own reasons for contributing to a healthy society: Christianity or political devotion.

3. Christian leaders and teachers should model a life motivated by Christianity and show the correlation between Christian obedience to Scripture and a healthier society.

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