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Does increased wealth explain the decline of the West's religious fervor?

Joe Ferullo | Sep. 11, 2013 NCR Today

We've all met that guy: He's pretty well-off, thinks he did it on his own, up by the bootstraps, never asked for a handout. Turns out this guy is more than annoying -- he may actually help explain the decline of religious fervor in the West.

A spate of recent studies shows that the better off people are, the less compassionate they are likely to be toward the less fortunate. One study cited by NPR [1], for example, discovered that people who described themselves as upper income were not interested in giving away anything from a stack of meaningless "credits" handed to them by researchers.

Other studies demonstrated that luxury car drivers cut other people off more often, that wealthy people lied more in negotiations, and that the rich were -- seriously -- less likely to share a pile of candy they were given with a group of children.

The changes wealth seems to generate go even deeper. Studies at the University of Rotterdam revealed that people who thought more about money preferred to play and work alone and were less helpful to others.

All this research certainly explains the Gospel admonition that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. But why? What lies behind this behavior, and what does that say about the future of the church?

Rabbi David Wolpe, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* [2], gets to the heart of the matter:

> We all know, deep down, that most of what we have is a product of good fortune. No matter how hard we work, we did not earn our functioning brains or the families into which we were born. We didn't choose being born into an era, or a nation, that allowed our talents to develop ... Yet we still point to our accomplishments and proudly proclaim, "I did this!"
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> No one likes to feel that what they have achieved stems more from luck than merit. So the well-off salve their consciences by assuring themselves that it is hard work and merit that brought them success, which also leads them to conclude that it is a lack of merit that keeps others from succeeding.

Replace the words "good fortune" and "luck" with "grace," and the Western dilemma comes into focus. If you extrapolate these studies of individuals out to an examination of wealthy societies, the decline in established religion can be seen as a consequence of that same mindset. First-world societies are convinced they have conquered uncertainty, cocooned themselves against the unknowable. The West has triumphed over the haphazard slings and arrows of outrageous fortune -- even our cars are equipped with a bundle of safety devices

designed to leave little to chance.

So there is no need for faith. The religious lessons of compassion and humility seem not to apply to everyday life anymore and seem as outmoded as Bible stories about leprosy and other curious diseases overcome decades ago.

And yet, Wolpe is right: This is just a story we tell ourselves. Deep down, we know better. We are reminded of this when one car smacks into another for no good reason and someone is disabled for life; when a child sinks in a pool during those two seconds no one looking; when 1,000 minor things don't go at all the way we planned. Let alone the big things.

There is something in human nature, it appears, that needs to fight that reality. This need is probably responsible for more human progress than we realize, has saved countless lives and made millions more better than anyone believed those lives could be. But it doesn't wipe reality away.

It's unclear to me what the church can do to block this tide from rolling in. It could go the route of many American megachurches and celebrate wealth, affirm that the acquisition of material goods is a sign of God's blessings bestowed. But I can't see Pope Francis, especially, falling for that.

Maybe all the church can do is what Francis is doing: Visit the poor and less fortunate, walk with them as equals, and serve as a three-dimensional reminder of the proverb, "Man plans; God laughs."

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