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Abstract

In this provocative work, Dr. William Jeynes of California State University at Long Beach addresses a vital educational question: is there a statistically verifiable relationship between religious belief and academic achievement? For the non-Christian, it is a question of the social utility of religion; does a demonstrable and significant correlation between a religious mindset and measurable academic outcomes exist? Or is a secular outlook equally capable of superior educational success? For the Christian thinker, it is a question of the relationship between the root of faith and the fruit of the "strong mind" (II Tim. 1:7) promised in the scriptures. Can this be translated into statistical categories like "religious people" and "religious institutions" for investigation? If so, how can this be done?

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Reviewed by David Robinson

William Jeynes. *Religion, Education, and Academic Success*. Greenwich: Information Age Publishing, 2003. xii + 266 pp. \$39.99 (paperback). ISBN: 1-931576-52-1.

In this provocative work, Dr. William Jeynes of California State University at Long Beach addresses a vital educational question: is there a statistically verifiable relationship between religious belief and academic achievement? For the non-Christian, it is a question of the social utility of religion; does a demonstrable and significant correlation between a religious mindset and measurable academic outcomes exist? Or is a secular outlook equally capable of superior educational success? For the Christian thinker, it is a question of the relationship between the root of faith and the fruit of the “strong mind” (II Tim. 1:7) promised in the scriptures. Can this be translated into statistical categories like “religious people” and “religious institutions” for investigation? If so, how can this be done?

A related issue is the effect that radical secularization has had on our schools. If there is a positive correlation between a “religious” belief structure and superior behavior and achievement in the classroom, what happens when the expression and encouragement of such beliefs is disallowed? Is there a verifiable set of negative social and academic consequences that accompanies the abandonment of a spiritual framework in education? And if religion can be demonstrated to be a truly positive influence on academic outcomes, should it be excluded as adamantly as it is in our schools today? Addressing such important questions is a daunting challenge.

Jeynes starts out with a historical survey of American educational history and its biblical foundations. Clearly, this isn’t intended to be an in-depth treatment; instead, Jeynes concentrates on summarizing the powerful role that religion, particularly Christianity, has played in the establishment of American educational

institutions. From the arrival of the Puritans in New England until just recently, America has generally been a nation that framed much of its internal debates in terms of religious and spiritual concerns. Foreign observers like de Tocqueville and Chesterton noted this fact of American life, with Chesterton's well-known aphorism, "America is a nation with the soul of a church" sealing up the sum. No general history of this nation, regardless of the personal views of the historian, could be written without addressing the centrality of the religious dimension in our civilization. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of anyone attempting such a hopeless project, as Jeynes' historical summary makes evident.

But things have changed. Jeynes notes that the legal and social trends in the United States from 1962/1963 onwards have reversed the traditional assumptions about the role of religion in America, and in its educational system. He chronicles the shift in the landscape occasioned by a significant set of Supreme Court decisions at this time: *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), and *Murray v. Curlett* (1963). Instead of the actual "non-establishment" language of the First Amendment, a much more radical "separation of church and state" doctrine was embodied. (Many Americans are completely unaware of the fact that the phrase "the separation of church and state" does *not* appear anywhere in the Constitution.) The collective impact of these rapid hammer blows was revolutionary; overnight, the Supreme Court had divorced traditional prayer, the reading of the Bible, and religious gatherings on public school premises from the public school system. And while popular and political reaction to the Supreme Court's actions was overwhelmingly hostile, there was no effective legislative response to reverse the change. Jeynes documents that in the aftermath, other court cases at the state level would extend the secularizing trend begun at the Supreme Court.

So far, the thesis is clear. Jeynes next step is where his analysis becomes riskier: he asserts that there is an almost immediate and *resultant* increase in problems in both school and home. In the aftermath of the decisions of 1962-63, divorce rates increase, television watching soars, drug use skyrockets, juvenile delinquency grows, behavioral problems in the classroom escalate in both quantity and severity, and standardized test scores plunge. "Between 1963 and 1980, the United States had its most substantial academic test score decline in history." (p. 148; see also the "Implications" section, 148-149). As a result, many evangelical Christians depart the public schools to establish Christian schools, which burgeon remarkably. Jeynes asserts that there is a cause-and-effect relationship in play

between the Supreme Court decisions and the sudden eruption of social problems listed above. I suspect that this is where some – and perhaps more than just some – readers will furrow their brows, or cry “foul!” Any historian knows that causation, correlation, and coincidence can be nasty knots to untangle, and some may suspect that Jeynes is guilty of the logical fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Nevertheless, the complex of calamities that erupted in and around that fateful year of 1963 does give one pause: if the decisions of the Supreme Court which commenced the official exile of Christ, the Bible and prayer from the classroom were entirely coincidental with the almost immediate social catastrophes that followed, then the coincidence is certainly a remarkable one.

Jeynes doesn’t simply do a historical profile of recent social decay, however. On the more optimistic side, he sets himself the task of demonstrating whether a statistically significant positive correlation between personal religious faith/religious schooling and superior academic achievement exists. The nagging question of how to statistically quantify or model a “religious person” is addressed, together with a discussion of the skewing of available datasets in favor of the much less demanding “religious institution” data source. This sets the theoretical framework for what follows.

In the balance of the book, Jeynes rolls up his researcher sleeves and delivers a wealth of meta-analysis in support of the positive influence of religion in education. He states that “many social scientists believe that the meta-analytic technique is the best way to resolve controversial research issues.” (p. 131). Those who prefer quantitative studies will find much grist for their mills here, since Jeynes’ meta-analysis incorporates the findings of 124 studies. (Qualitative readers can scan the data tables and methodological discourse and go straight to the “Discussion” and “Implications” sections.) The results are intriguing: “attending religious schools and having personal religious commitment are associated with higher levels of academic achievement.” (p. 144). The effect size was assessed at a consistent two-tenths to one-quarter of a standard deviation. The finding was the same for a subset meta-study that examined fifteen studies of minority students – in this case, for blacks and Hispanics. There were likewise statistically significant results for the effects of religious commitment and religious schooling on school safety, moral behavior, and the use/abuse of alcohol and drugs.

Overall, the rigor and thoroughness of Jeynes’ meta-study is impressive. He is temperate and judicious in his conclusions, and honestly states the limitations of the analysis. Suggestions for further research are given, particularly the need for

studies that examine the effects that a *combination* of personal religious commitment and a religious school environment have on academic achievement. Jeynes also recommends that longitudinal studies be done to assess the effects of religious commitment and religious schooling over time, since his meta-analysis indicates that the time-domain improvements in achievement actually increase.

Given the consistent statistical evidence indicating superior academic performance in religious schools, Jeynes then addresses its most obvious and controversial political implication: that of school choice. The question is unavoidable: if private religious education and religious commitment produces significant increases in academic achievement, shouldn't all Americans have the choice to select such an option for their children? There is a notable dearth of data about the effect that liberty of choice could have on the academic performance of the nation's youth. According to Jeynes, the opposition uses the "argument from silence" to assert that the efficacy of vouchers and school choice is unproven. The fallacy of that assertion lies in the fact that the absence of data is reflective of the public monopoly on the vast majority of educational funds and options, and not of the inadequacy of educational choice. In other words, the data is silent because few opportunities to develop a dataset have been allowed. The political opposition of organizations like the NEA and the state educational associations has assured that true educational choice and an alliance with faith-based institutions via vouchers will never happen. Jeynes is moderate in tone, but clearly considers this to be a loss for the nation's students and their parents. He points out that if his meta-study's findings about religious school and faith-committed student achievement are accurate, they indicate that American educators and politicians should examine the possibility of real school choice – one that involves the controversial prospect of allowing public funds to be used to underwrite vouchers in the private sector, or tax breaks for parents exercising such choice, to offset tuition costs. Questions of equity and access have been raised by opponents, but they have also been solved in Europe and have been dealt with successfully in models like the Milwaukee system in the United States. Jeynes is cautiously optimistic that they could be solved on a larger scale in America, as well. He recommends experimentation with vouchers on successively larger trial settings, until the problems related to systems of greater magnitude can be evaluated and resolved.

Regardless of whether vouchers are adopted or not, Jeynes makes it clear that the superior academic achievements of the religious schools, and those students who have a personal faith commitment, remains. The only question is whether or not

America is willing to make use of what might be learned from that fact.

Religion, Education, and Academic Success ends with a series of lessons that American public education might learn from “religious schools and religious people.” First, Jeynes urges that the lessons of our history, teaching us of the fundamental importance of religion in American life, ought to be studied and, if not embraced, then at least acknowledged as a fount of many educational blessings. Second, he states that the effectiveness of religious schools in providing superior academic achievement ought to lead to a willingness to study their model, and see what values and structures might be adopted into public schools. Third, he asserts that the statistically significant improvements that religious schools produce in academic achievement and in providing a safe and healthy educational environment ought to drive a greater willingness to examine school choice via vouchers and tax breaks to parents as an alternative to public school monopolies on public funds. The non-establishment clause of the First Amendment does not forbid such liberty of choice and funding; only *mandatory* attendance in a religious school would do that. The time has come to bypass this false conception, and adopt a willingness to experiment for the well being of our students. Fourth, Jeynes believes that religious commitment and faith-based initiatives should be valued once more in American life generally.

Jeynes has accomplished an important task in outlining the statistical evidence in favor of religious schooling and those whose faith commits them to the full pursuit of academic achievement. His parallel summary history of the biblical foundations of American education, and the recent marginalization of Christianity within our national culture since 1963, is a very sobering counterpoint. That he does both without stridency and with judicious moderation is a tribute to his balanced approach. To Jeynes, the challenge is clear: “As a society, if America wants the benefits that religious commitment and religious schools have to offer then it should encourage religious schooling and religious commitment far more than it does.” (p. 238). Will America recover from the moral and spiritual quagmire that it has occupied since 1963? Can it find its way back to a social order in which the root of faith and the fruit of “good works” – including a “strong mind” – can flourish? Or will the religion of “no religion whatsoever” continue its domination? Jeynes says that some social scientists see signs of a re-emerging consciousness of the benefits that religion brings to our society. “Only time will tell,” Jeynes concludes, “whether this reawakening will continue to the place where religion once again has the opportunity to contribute to making America’s schools better

and its society better.” (p. 238). Anyone who is interested in that reawakening will find Jeynes’ book to be essential reading.

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