


Hellfire and Delinquency

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HELLFIRE AND DELINQUENCY*

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Religious training is assumed to prevent delinquency by promoting the development of moral values, acceptance of conventional authority, and belief in the existence of supernatural sanctions. The relations between church attendance and these presumed consequences are examined. Children who attend church are no more likely than non-attenders to accept ethical principles; they are only slightly more likely than non-attenders to respect conventional authority; they are much more likely to believe in the literal existence of the Devil and a life after death. Those variables affected by church attendance, however, are unrelated to the commission of delinquent acts, while those variables strongly related to delinquency are unaffected by church attendance. The lack of a relation between church attendance and delinquency is thus "explained."

From time to time judges advise juvenile offenders to attend church for periods of months or years. Such "sentences" are not intended as punishment.[1] Because the judge assumes that religious training and commitment produce moral character, he assumes such attendance may lead to repentance and reform. This view is widespread in law enforcement circles. As J. Edgar Hoover tells us:

> Invariably when you analyze the reasons for such [criminal] actions, certain facts stand out stark and revealing—the faith of our fathers, the love of God, and the observance of His Commandments have either been thrust aside or they never existed in the heart of the individual transgressor . . . (Coogan, 1954).

It is hardly surprising that this position is supported by clergymen. Religious leaders traditionally blame "rising crime and immorality" on a decline in religious conviction, and many argue that religious commitment is the *only* secure basis for moral behavior. In the writings of religious scholars, again and again we encounter the same syllogism:

> Most acts of delinquency are amoral, and the roots of morality are either principally or exclusively religious. Delinquents, therefore, should be lower than nondelinquents in religiosity or religiousness (Cortes, 1965:122).

Such notions are congruent with the social scientific view that religious sanctioning systems play an important role in ensuring and maintaining conformity to social norms (Davis, 1948: 73-74, 371-373). Drawing heavily on the work of Emile Durkheim, the way in which religion performs this role is usually summarized as follows (Yinger, 1957): (1) through its belief system religion legitimates social and individual values; (2) through its rituals it reinforces commitment to these values; (3) through its system

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[1] However, Hager (1957) reports that the judge's advice may in effect become a requirement and nonattendance considered a violation of probation or parole.

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of eternal rewards and punishment, religion helps to insure the embodiment of values in actual behavior.

It is hard to challenge the idea that persons often do have internalized ethics which sometimes govern their actions. But does religion, at least in contemporary society, have much to do with developing or sustaining such personal ethics? Indeed, is the Christian sanctioning system of hellfire for sinners and heavenly glory for the just, able to deter unlawful behavior even among those who are firm believers?

By implication these questions bear on present concerns over the relevance of religion in modern life. Many clergymen have come to doubt the ability of the faith to move men on moral questions. These doubts have arisen mainly around such matters as prejudice, peace, poverty, and various political abominations. However, the relation between religiousness and delinquency seems to offer an especially critical test of the relevance of religion. For if religion proves immaterial here, in an area where it has always concentrated its efforts to influence the ways in which men act, then its failure would seem acute. Evidence on this question is mixed. Against the pronouncements of the theoretical sociologist, the lawman, the layman, and the clergy, a few criminologists have stood firm. In their view, the allegedly intimate connection between religiosity and noncriminality is not obvious. Teeters (1952:41) only slightly overstates the position of this group when he writes:

> If there are any studies whatsoever that show up the value of religious training as a deterrent to crime, delinquency, immorality, or unethical conduct, this writer has never seen them.[2]

But there is by no means unanimity on this point among criminologists, and the usual problems arise when one attempts to reach a firm conclusion from past research. Much of this research does not meet minimum standards of adequacy: for example, many of the studies cited in typical review articles do not even have comparison groups (see Powers, 1967). But there is a further and somewhat unusual problem: interestingly enough, accusations of bias, either for or against religion, are common.[3] And, indeed, there does seem to be a relation between the findings and the religiosity of the researcher. While most studies conducted by criminologists suggest that religion has little or no effect, research by religionists tends to indicate that religion is just what it has always been thought to be, a powerful "aid to the sword" in the maintenance of conformity, a factor in delinquency at least equal to the variables traditionally considered important by criminologists.[4]

Given these conflicting claims, given the sociological view of the functions

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[2] Teeters is replying to Coogan (1952) who takes criminologists to task for ignoring the impact of religion.

[3] "There seems to be a bias in favor of religious influence as an aid to good behavior whenever the investigator is a religious leader" (Powers, 1967:196). Compare: "Many research persons are . . . definitely anti-religious in their approach to the crime problem" (Elliott, 1952:835). For expansion of the latter view, see Coogan (1952).

[4] ". . . the difference in religiosity was extremely significant. There was no other variable which discriminated better between (delinquents and nondelinquents)" (Cortes 1965:123). See also Travers and Davis (1961).

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of religious institutions, and given the more narrowly practical question of the relevance of religion to man's day-to-day behavior, we propose to examine again the question of the relation between religiosity and delinquency.

SAMPLE AND DATA

The sample on which our study is based was drawn from students entering the public junior and senior high schools of Western Contra Costa County, California, in the Fall of 1964. This population was stratified by race, sex, school, and grade, and random samples drawn from each substratum.[5] Of the 5,545 students drawn in the original sample, 4,077 or 74 percent eventually completed a lengthy questionnaire.[6] School records on the entire original sample, and police records on all boys in the original sample are also available.[7]

Measures of delinquency. Delinquency was measured both by self-reports and by examination of police records. The self report index of delinquency was constructed from these items:

1. Have you ever taken little things (worth less than $2) that did not belong to you?
2. Have you ever taken things of some value (between $2 and $50) that did not belong to you?
3. Have you ever taken things of large value (worth over $50) that did not belong to you?
4. Have you ever taken a car for a ride without the owner's permission?
5. Have you ever banged up something that did not belong to you on purpose?
6. Not counting fights you may have had with a brother or sister, have you ever beaten up on anyone or hurt anyone on purpose?

All of these acts are violations of law. In legal terms, they represent petty and grand larceny, auto theft, vandalism, and assault. Since the students reported when they had committed each of the acts listed, index scores were constructed simply by counting the number of separate offenses the student had committed in the year prior to administration of the questionnaire.

The measure of official delinquency is a count of the number of offenses known to the police over the period of about three years prior to examination of police records. Among white boys, the correlation between the self-report and official measures is .27. Rather than concern ourselves with the relative validity of these measures, we shall conduct parallel analyses using both the self-report and official measures of delinquency.

Measures of religiosity. If delinquency research is subject to dis-

[5] Sampling was disproportionate by race and sex: 85 percent of Negro boys, 60 percent of Negro girls, 30 percent of white boys, and 12 percent of white girls were selected. These percentages were selected in each grade in all schools *except* where the sampling fraction would not produce at least 25 students in each school, in which case the entire population of the school was included. When race and sex are held constant, as in the present analysis, the original sample is therefore unbiased—except for a very slight over-representation of Negroes from predominantly white schools.

[6] In previous analyses of these data, adjustment has been made for differences among the substrata in the proportion actually completing the questionnaire. Such weighting procedures were not available for the present analysis. In most cases, however, comparison with previous results is possible, and the conclusions do not differ from one procedure to the other.

[7] All of which gives unusually detailed information on the extent of non-response bias in the questionnaire sample. For analysis of the extent and effect of nonresponse bias, see Wilson (1965:3-21) and Hirschi (1969:41-46).

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missal on the ground that its findings bear only tangentially on the real phenomenon of delinquency, research on religiosity is doubly vulnerable to this charge. We shall not here be concerned with what religiosity really is. Instead, we shall take for granted the view that religiosity is many things; that these things should not be inextricably bound to each other by definition, but may be linked to each other by conjecture and hypothesis (Stark and Glock, 1968:11-21).

The usual beginning point in studies of the effects of religion on delinquency is a measure of church attendance. In our opinion, this is as it should be. The view that church attendance should reduce delinquency is accepted by sociologists, layman, and the clergy, not because it keeps the child off the streets for a few hours each week, but because participation in religious activities is believed to promote: (1) the internalization and/or acceptance of moral values, the belief that one's fellows deserve fair and just treatment; (2) acceptance of the legitimacy of legal authority, of the law and its agents; (3) belief in the literal existence of a supernatural world, and therefore the belief that one may be punished in the world to come for violations in the here and now.

We begin by examining the effects of church attendance on the attitudes and beliefs that in this view *link* such attendance to conformity with conventional codes of conduct.

Religion and Moral Values

Sociological theorists have been generally unwilling to see in delinquency evidence of immorality. In fact, sociologists have become so leery of "morality" as a concept that they are likely to stress the view that "illegality" and "immorality" are not the same thing, and, by extension, have little to do with one another. The clergyman, in contrast, has remained steadfast in the belief that morality and delinquency are intimately related, that most illegal acts are also immoral, and that the church has therefore an important role to play in the prevention of delinquency. Therefore, we must first ask: Is church attendance related to morality as the latter is traditionally defined by the church?

Two items on the questionnaire seem particularly appropriate as measures of morality. The students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with these statements:

> To get ahead, you have to do some things that are not right.
> Suckers deserve to be taken advantage of.

Table 1 shows the relations between these items and church attendance. Although seven of the eight relations are in the direction favoring the view that attendance at religious services promotes acceptance of moral values, in all cases but one the relations are miniscule. For all intents and purposes, then, church attendance does not affect acceptance of the moral values assumed to be important deterrents of delinquency. Students who attend church are as likely as nonattenders to believe that those unable to defend themselves from exploitation deserve such exploitation; they are as likely to believe that success in worldly terms requires, and by implication justifies, the breaking of the moral law.

Religion and Acceptance of Worldly Authority

Sutherland has said that persons become criminal because of an ex-

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TABLE 1
PERCENT ACCEPTING AMORAL STATEMENTS, BY CHURCH ATTENDANCE, RACE, AND SEX

	Church Attendance					
	Once a Week	2-3 Times a Month	Once Month—Holidays	Hardly Ever	Never	Gamma[a]
Suckers deserve to be taken advantage of						
White Boys	25 (610)	29 (187)	30 (220)	27 (360)	32 (211)	—.04
Negro Boys	43 (525)	41 (191)	43 (121)	53 (124)	40 (40)	—.03
White Girls	16 (363)	17 (82)	23 (79)	19 (115)	19 (36)	—.03
Negro Girls	36 (541)	37 (147)	46 (46)	25 (60)	32 (19)	.01
To get ahead, you have to do some things that are not right						
White Boys	26 (610)	30 (187)	35 (220)	28 (360)	35 (211)	—.08
Negro Boys	49 (525)	48 (191)	60 (121)	50 (124)	52 (40)	—.04
White Girls	20 (363)	18 (82)	16 (79)	24 (115)	31 (36)	—.09
Negro Girls	31 (541)	38 (147)	28 (46)	57 (60)	58 (19)	—.14[b]

[a] In all tables presented, gamma was computed before the table was collapsed to its present form. For example, there were originally three categories of response to "Suckers deserve to be taken advantage of"—agree, undecided, disagree. The double- and triple-negative problems make straightforward interpretation of the sign of the relation difficult. In the tables on this page, the minus sign means literally that as non-attendance increases agreement with the statement declines.

[b] χ^2 significant at one percent level.

cess of definitions favorable to violation of law (Sutherland and Cressey, 1960:78). Although Sutherland did not specify the content of these attitudes and values conducive to law violation, attitudes toward the law itself and toward the agents of the legal system, especially the police, are obviously relevant. Once again, then, we are led to expect a relation between religiosity and non-criminality, for the religious-moral laws advocated by the churches are largely incorporated in legal restraints. Most crimes, in other words, are also violations of the teachings of the church (Elliott, 1952:364). Furthermore, the churches strongly encourage respect for the law and cooperation with legal authorities.

The items used to determine the efficacy of the church in promoting such respect are straightforward. Students were asked to respond to the following statements:

> It is all right to get around the law if you can get away with it.
> I have a lot of respect for the (local) police.

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TABLE 2
RESPECT FOR LAW AND RESPECT FOR THE POLICE BY CHURCH ATTENDANCE, RACE, AND SEX

	Church Attendance					
Percent agreeing all right to get around the law	Once a Week	2-3 Times a Month	Once Month—Holidays	Hardly Ever	Never	Gamma
White Boys	10 (542)	8 (179)	18 (211)	9 (343)	17 (207)	—.13[a]
Negro Boys	21 (407)	20 (169)	28 (105)	32 (102)	28 (36)	—.10
White Girls	6 (333)	6 (78)	7 (75)	5 (112)	3 (31)	—.09
Negro Girls	18 (477)	20 (133)	35 (43)	20 (54)	47 (19)	—.22[a]
Percent expressing respect for the police						
White Boys	65 (610)	63 (187)	62 (220)	60 (360)	49 (211)	.09[a]
Negro Boys	62 (525)	65 (191)	56 (121)	49 (124)	37 (40)	.09[a]
White Girls	73 (363)	76 (82)	62 (79)	69 (115)	56 (36)	.08
Negro Girls	65 (541)	62 (147)	67 (46)	62 (60)	52 (19)	.05

[a] Significant at the five percent level (χ^2).

Table 2 shows that students who attend church frequently are very slightly more likely than infrequent attenders to express respect for the police, and are slightly less likely to agree that law violation is okay if you don't get caught. Seven of the eight relations are in the direction predicted from the assumption that exposure to religious teachings fosters acceptance of the legitimacy of worldly authority. In this case, four of the seven relations are statistically significant. We would conclude, then, on the basis of these data, that church attendance has some, very weak, effect on the development of attitudes apparently favorable to obedience to law.[8]

RELIGION AND SUPERNATURAL SANCTIONS

Sociologists are as likely as churchmen to stress the fear of supernatural sanctions in the maintenance of conformity. According to Ross (1920:131), for example, Christianity has made

[8] Other analysis shows that respect for the law and for the police decline rather markedly with age in the present sample. Although church attendance also declines with age, the relations in Table 2 survive when age is held relatively constant.

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TABLE 3
PERCENT HIGH ON INDEX OF BELIEF IN SUPERNATURAL SANCTIONS BY CHURCH ATTENDANCE, RACE, AND SEX

	Church Attendance					
	Once a Week	2-3 Times a Month	Once Month—Holidays	Hardly Ever	Never	Gamma
White Boys	49 (505)	28 (162)	23 (194)	19 (334)	12 (187)	—.40
Negro Boys	50 (357)	34 (149)	30 (98)	21 (94)	32 (31)	—.30
White Girls	49 (327)	34 (79)	23 (74)	19 (108)	31 (32)	—.34
Negro Girls	42 (447)	40 (126)	36 (39)	42 (50)	53 (15)	—.07

the doctrine of a future life "a deterrent influence of the strongest kind." The idea is simple: In the life beyond death, the lot of each man will be at least in part determined by his thoughts and actions during his worldly existence. Since crimes unseen by worldly authorities are seen by watchers in another world, the fear of hell operates silently and efficiently to assure conformity to conventional, worldy norms.

It would appear obvious that participation in organized religious activities contributes to belief in the existence of a life beyond death populated by spirits or persons capable of punishing one for wrongdoings while on earth. Since we have already seen cases where obvious relations were nonexistent, however, in Table 3 we show the relation between church attendance and an index of belief in supernatural sanctions. The index was constructed from responses to two items: "There is a life beyond death," and, "The devil actually exists." Among all groups except Negro girls (where belief in the devil and a life beyond death is common even among those who do not attend church) differences by church attendance are marked. Those attending church with some frequency are much more likely to believe in the literal existence of a supernatural realm than those only rarely attending church.

To this point we have examined three presumed consequences or correlates of religious activity thought by many to be important in the prevention of delinquency. One of the three routes by which religion might affect delinquency has been to all intents and purposes closed: those attending church are no more likely than those not attending church to accept moral and ethical principles opposed to the commission of illegal acts.[9] A second possible route from religiosity to nondelinquency remains only partially

[9] The lack of relationship between church attendance and moral and ethical principles in these data is supported by the more general finding that commitment to the tenets of Christian ethicalism, such as "Love thy neighbor" or "Do good unto others," is not related to commitment to Christian orthodoxy, or to church attendance, praying, or participation in church activities. See: Stark and Glock (1968) Ch. 9.

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open: students attending church are only slightly more likely to have attitudes favorable to law and the police. If religiosity does affect delinquency, its major path of influence must be through its effect on belief in the existence of other-worldly sanctions, for it is only here that differences by church attendance are in any way pronounced.

We have seen the effect of church attendance on the variables through which it presumably affects delinquency. Are those variables themselves actually related to delinquency? According to Table 4, that set of variables unrelated to church attendance, which we have called measures of acceptance of moral values, *is* indeed related to delinquency. Students agreeing that suckers deserve what they get, that in order to achieve success in life one must occasionally sacrifice what one considers right, are much more likely than students disagreeing with these statements to have committed

TABLE 4

PERCENT COMMITTING TWO OR MORE DELINQUENT ACTS BY ACCEPTANCE OF MORAL VALUES

Suckers deserve to be taken advantage of	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Gamma
White Boys (SR)[a]	30 (440)	22 (324)	12 (824)	—.27
Negro Boys (SR)	26 (230)	28 (217)	17 (319)	—.12
White Girls (SR)	11 (74)	3 (131)	5 (411)	—.03
Negro Girls (SR)	14 (174)	6 (179)	7 (328)	—.21
White Boys (Off)[b]	12 (440)	10 (324)	6 (824)	—.20
Negro Boys (Off)	23 (240)	23 (231)	15 (330)	—.17

To get ahead, you have to do some things that are not right	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Gamma
White Boys (SR)[a]	27 (468)	26 (264)	13 (856)	—.26
Negro Boys (SR)	26 (254)	28 (159)	17 (327)	—.12
White Girls (SR)	11 (71)	11 (103)	3 (429)	—.29
Negro Girls (SR)	10 (154)	10 (135)	6 (388)	—.14
White Boys (Off)[b]	12 (468)	11 (264)	7 (856)	—.18
Negro Boys (Off)	22 (259)	22 (162)	18 (333)	—.09

[a] Self-reported delinquent acts.

[b] Official delinquent acts. The police records of girls were not available.

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delinquent acts, by both self-report and by official measures.

According to Table 5, respect for the law and for the police, while only weakly related to church attendance, are both strongly negatively related to the commission of delinquent acts, again by both the self-report and official measures, and within all race-sex categories.

But when we turn to the one intervening variable strongly influenced by church attendance, the pattern reverses: *Students who believe in the Devil and in a life after death are just as likely to commit delinquent acts as are students who do not believe in a supernatural world* (as Table 6 shows).

On the basis of what we know, then, there is very little reason to expect a relation between religious activity and delinquency. The beliefs such activity affects are essentially unrelated to delinquency; the beliefs and attitudes the church has been traditionally assumed to affect are in fact strongly related to delinquency, but, alas for the church, it does not influence these beliefs and attitudes. And,

TABLE 5
PERCENT COMMITTING TWO OR MORE DELINQUENT ACTS BY RESPECT FOR THE POLICE AND RESPECT FOR LAW

It is all right to get around the law if you can get away with it	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Gamma
White Boys (SR)	44 (177)	29 (259)	13 (1081)	—.41
Negro Boys (SR)	33 (208)	27 (181)	16 (477)	—.18
White Girls (SR)	18 (38)	12 (76)	4 (528)	—.42
Negro Girls (SR)	15 (154)	9 (136)	5 (458)	—.25
White Boys (Off)	16 (183)	12 (264)	7 (1089)	—.33
Negro Boys (Off)	27 (212)	19 (187)	17 (482)	—.22
I have a lot of respect for the Richmond police	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Gamma
White Boys (SR)	13 (969)	23 (396)	39 (223)	.34
Negro Boys (SR)	15 (463)	32 (219)	33 (183)	.26
White Girls (SR)	4 (450)	9 (156)	14 (42)	.32
Negro Girls (SR)	6 (460)	7 (152)	15 (137)	.16
White Boys (Off)	5 (969)	10 (396)	22 (223)	.33
Negro Boys (Off)	17 (472)	19 (222)	30 (187)	.19

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TABLE 6
PERCENT COMMITTING TWO OR MORE DELINQUENT ACTS, BY BELIEF IN EXISTENCE OF OTHER-WORLDLY SANCTIONS, RACE, AND SEX

	Index of Belief in Supernatural Sanctions			
	Low	Medium	High	Gamma
White Boys (SR)	19 (320)	20 (641)	16 (425)	—.03
Negro Boys (SR)	19 (91)	21 (363)	25 (300)	.09
White Girls (SR)	7 (127)	5 (257)	5 (234)	.11
Negro Girls (SR)	11 (81)	8 (314)	8 (275)	—.07
White Boys (Off)	8 (329)	9 (660)	8 (433)	.02
Negro Boys (Off)	16 (99)	22 (379)	17 (312)	—.07

indeed, Table 7 shows that church attendance is essentially unrelated to delinquency. *Students who attend church every week are as likely to have committed delinquent acts as students who attend church only rarely or not at all.* None of the relations in Table 7 approaches statistical significance. None of the differences is of theoretical or practical significance, nor were they affected by denominational controls. Participation in religious activities and belief in a supernatural sanctioning system have no effect on delinquent activity.

Further evidence for the same conclusion is provided by the lack of a relation between the mother's church

TABLE 7
PERCENT COMMITTING TWO OR MORE DELINQUENT ACTS BY CHURCH ATTENDANCE, RACE, AND SEX

	Church Attendance					
	Once a Week	2-3 Times a Month	Once Month—Holidays	Hardly Ever	Never	Gamma
White Boys (SR)	17 (545)	21 (186)	23 (210)	20 (346)	22 (206)	.02
Negro Boys (SR)	22 (424)	24 (172)	21 (112)	25 (114)	40 (38)	.10
White Girls (SR)	5 (337)	5 (79)	8 (79)	4 (112)	15 (34)	.01
Negro Girls (SR)	7 (488)	10 (137)	19 (43)	10 (59)	6 (18)	.11
White Boys (Off)	7 (554)	6 (187)	13 (220)	9 (360)	11 (211)	.06
Negro Boys (Off)	19 (445)	22 (191)	18 (121)	24 (124)	25 (40)	.08

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attendance and delinquency, by the absence of important differences between those students who belong to a church and those who do not, and by the fact that the several measures of religiosity are unrelated to yet another form of unethical conduct, cheating on tests—thus replicating a finding that goes back almost forty years (Hartshorne and May, 1930:357-362).

DISCUSSION

There are, of course, studies showing weak relations between church attendance and non-delinquency. In fact, two of the most respected pieces of research in the field, those of Nye (1958:35-36) and of the Gluecks (1950:166-167) show that children who attend church regularly are somewhat less likely than non-attenders to be delinquent. If we grant that Nye's and the Gluecks' data are as good as our own, it may appear that we have contributed merely to the inconsistency and inconclusiveness of delinquency research. In our opinion such a conclusion is not warranted. Neither Nye nor the Gluecks report anything beyond the fact of a small relation. Had they attempted to determine why church attendance is or is not related to delinquency in their samples, as we have done, they might very well have concluded that church attendance is not in fact *causally* related to delinquency. The fact that there are many reasons to expect a causal relation between church attendance and delinquency is not sufficient reason to accept an observed relation without further analysis.

This touches on a problem endemic in evaluations of social science research. Had our investigation shown that religion is a deterrent to delinquency, we would have been accused of demonstrating the obvious. But the point in testing common sense notions is demonstrated by the fact that this one, as with many others, is simply wrong. Unfortunately, when social science reports against common sense, it is too often accused of falsehood, inadequate methods, or plain stupidity. Whenever one does research on religion this problem becomes especially acute. A common response from religionists to findings they dislike is to dismiss them by redefining religiousness in a way that excludes all culpability (Stark and Glock, 1968: Ch. 1). Thus, some will be prompted to respond that delinquency *is* irreligiosity, and that no *truly* religious youths commit delinquent acts. Such assertions are irrefutable, for they are true by definition. But, if one grants that religiousness has several components, and that they are capable of varying to some extent independently of each other, then we may conclude on the basis of these data that such central aspects of religiosity as attendance at religious services and belief in the existence of a supernatural world are unrelated to the legality or, for that matter, the morality of behavior.

This, of course, does not say anything about the prevailing level of law-abiding behavior or morality in American society. On the contrary, the roots of morality, of law-abiding conduct are probably much the same as they have always been: attachment to, or, if you will, love for one's neighbor and awareness of and concern for the real-life costs of crime. The church is irrelevant to delinquency because it fails to instill in its members love for their neighbors and because belief in the possibility of pleasure and pain in another world cannot now, and per-

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haps never could, compete with the pleasures and pains of everyday life.

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