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Bliss trumps brimstone in forming religious practice: Study

By Misty Harris, Canwest News ServiceSeptember 9, 2009

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When both heaven and hell are considered valid final destinations, researchers find the notion of eternal bliss is three times more powerful than that of eternal damnation in shaping church attendance and frequency of prayer.

Photograph by: Kier Gilmour, Canwest News Service

Fire and brimstone may spice up doomsday prophecies, but a new study shows most people prefer to look on the bright side of afterlife.

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The 32-country study of some 35,000 people — Canadians among them — concludes that in the presence of the "largest possible stakes," rewards are more persuasive than punishments.

"Fear as a motivator isn't just religious; politicians, even in our own country, will use it to divide and manipulate by appealing to baser instincts," says Rev. Kevin Flynn, a professor of theology at Saint Paul University in Ottawa. "But this study suggests that over the long term, it's the positive that's going to offer more sustainable motivation."

In a forthcoming issue of the Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, researchers from Spain's University of Granada and Israel's Bar-Ilan University report that belief in heaven and hell significantly increases church attendance and prayer habits, while disbelief has the opposite effect.

But the "carrot" of heaven had triple the effect on these behaviours than the "stick" of hell, with men's religious practices more sharply affected by afterlife incentives than those of women.

The fundamental findings were consistent across the study's represented faiths, of which there were more than a dozen.

Experts such as Flynn believe the similarities make sense in the context of people's shared core values.

"I'll sometimes run into the hellfire-and-brimstone preachers on street corners who are trying to motivate passersby, scaring them into the kingdom," says Flynn. "But in the end, both the source and the goal of human life is love, which is why I think people respond to it more wholeheartedly than fear."

Rev. Gary Paterson, a minister at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church in Vancouver, suggests the effect works for the same reason positive reinforcement trumps the rod when parenting.

"Fear and guilt work in the short-term; you can often get big results when people are scared," says Paterson. "But the image of bliss has so much more drawing power over the long haul.

"The group that wants to describe hell to you is usually convinced they're going to heaven," Paterson observes wryly.

In a nationwide survey of 1,000 adults, polling firm Ipsos-Reid this year found roughly half of Canadians believe in afterlife: 21 per cent in heaven and hell; 20 per cent in a general afterlife that isn't specifically heaven or hell; and seven per cent only in heaven.

Rev. Jon Connell, a minister at Holy Trinity Riverbend Church in Edmonton, believes most modern parishioners are seeking spiritual meaning in life as opposed to worrying about what happens after death.

"Hell, fear of punishment, fear of the Lord and fear of eternal damnation are really far down the list," says Connell, though he adds that "the latent cultural Puritanism that resides deep within us is sometimes attracted to the rules and the fear rather than the love and the freedom of God."

mharris@canwest.com

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