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MSNBC Takes a Look at the “Dark Side of Faith” Report

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Alex Johnson of [MSNBC](#) takes a look at the controversy over Gregory Paul’s article and its aftermath [See my previous articles on this controversy [here](#) and [here](#).] In [his article](#), published Thursday, Johnson traces the debate.

In short, the controversy has to do with the fact that Gregory Paul argues that societies that have low levels of belief in God are doing well in terms of other social questions. In the media, his article was often presented as a claim that widespread belief in God causes high levels of social ills. As I argued at the time, correlation does not indicate causation.

Johnson reports: *Any statistician or social scientist will tell you that showing a correlation between two facts doesn’t mean much. If you like, you can also show a correlation between Paul’s indicators and time zones (the United States spans more than any other nation studied) or the number of McDonald’s restaurants or the number of national leaders named Bush. The only point to demonstrating a correlation is to lay the groundwork for further study. Dr. Jennie Robinson Kloos, a specialist in assessment methodology at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minn., said you would then examine whether one factor causes the other, whether a third entity might be causing both or whether the correlation is a coincidence. Paul said that’s exactly what he intended. His paper was “a first, brief look at an important subject that has been almost entirely neglected by social scientists ...,” he wrote. “It is hoped that these original correlations and results will spark future research and debate on the issue.” But others — including statisticians consulted by MSNBC.com who tentatively endorsed his work — aren’t so sure. Unless you have a point to make, why go to all that trouble?*

I won’t recount the whole controversy here, but I do want to express my appreciation for Alex Johnson’s fair consideration of the issues raised by the article and the subsequent controversy.

Mr. Johnson cited my Web log articles about Paul’s article in his report, and I appreciate the fact that he allowed me to state my central concern:

But Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist seminary — even as he questions Paul’s academic credentials and data — now says it doesn’t really matter whether he’s right or wrong. His paper sends the wrong message because it asks the wrong questions. Sure, he’s concerned that “there were those trying to make the argument that a society made up of secular citizens would be better off than one made up of Christian citizens,” he said. But “I also wanted to warn Christians that the argument for the truth of the Christian faith is independent of the social science statistics. It actually has very little to do with suggesting to a society that if you adopt [Christianity], you will better off as a people,” he said. “I would go so far to say that I would not want a person to become a Christian because they want to see a lowering in social pathologies, but because they’ve come to believe in Christ.”

SEE ALSO: My articles, “[Is Christianity Dangerous to Society?](#),” September 28, 2005 and “[The Dark Side of Faith](#),” October 3, 2005. See also Ruth Gledhill, “[Societies Worse Off ‘When They Have God on Their Side,’](#)” *The Times* [London]; Gregory S. Paul, “[Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies](#),” *Journal of Religion and Society* [VII:2005].

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