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Fruit of Faith, Fruit of the Spirit

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Fruit of Faith, Fruit of the Spirit

Thomas G. Plante

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

—Galatians 5:22

This quote from the Christian New Testament states that there are many positive psychological and behavioral results when one is attentive to and perhaps filled with God's spirit. As contemporary behavioral scientists living and working within an often secular, scientific, and empirically focused world as well as being affiliated with rigorous academic institutions and research programs, we wonder if the fruits of the spirit have any empirical and scientific basis. Does engagement with religion and spirituality make us better people or make us worse?

Perhaps the answer to this question is both. We are certainly well aware of the horrific behaviors that some people engage in stating that they are doing so due to their religious beliefs and practices. Some choose to kill and abuse others in the name of their religion, for example. Some discriminate against others and treat others with contempt, justifying their behavior and attitudes through their religious beliefs and affiliations. For centuries and perhaps millennia, people chose to treat others horrifically in the name of God. Religion can bring out the worst in people.

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However, the opposite also appears true. Many people behave admirably, nobly, and selflessly in the name of their religious traditions, beliefs, and practices. People show remarkable love, restraint, charity, compassion, and other admirable qualities. Religion and spirituality clearly appear to bring out the very best in people. So religion appears to play a role in turning out Mother Teresas as well as suicide bombers, both saints and sinners.

If one only hears about religious behavior and traditions from reading the daily news, the average person would likely have a very negative view of religion. Intolerant extremists, suicide bombers, and zealots of all kinds fill the news with behaviors that result in murder, torture, and hate. In contemporary years, perhaps many have come to believe that all Muslims are terrorists, all Catholic priests are pedophiles, and all Evangelical Christians hate homosexuals and believe that those not closely associated with their beliefs and practices will surely go to hell. Sadly, negative and appalling stereotypical behavior can emerge when overgeneralizing from these news reports. It is no wonder that the now-popular and well-known “new atheists” (e.g., Sam Harris, Christopher Hutchins, Richard Dawkins) have little respect or admiration for God or religious traditions. In some circles, it has become fashionable to be an atheist and a religion basher. Perhaps they read the news but don’t experience or witness the fruits of the Spirit in the religious and spiritual institutions and organizations that never make the headlines. Love, compassion, charity, self-sacrifice, soup kitchens, and so forth really never make news, while violence, hate, and intolerance certainly make headlines.

During recent decades, an enormous amount of research has been published on the relationship between religious and spiritual engagement, broadly defined, and psychological health and well-being. Overall, these studies have found that more often than not, religious and spiritual engagement is good for both physical and mental health.¹⁻²³ People who are affiliated and actively engaged with a religious and spiritual tradition tend to be more optimistic, happy, satisfied with their lives and with their loved ones and are less likely to be depressed, anxious, stressed, alcoholic, physically and mentally ill, and less likely to engage in health-damaging behaviors like cigarette smoking, drug abuse, unprotected sexual behavior, and violence. In fact, on average, research suggests that people tend to live seven years longer if engaged with religious and spiritual practices than

those who are not engaged. For African Americans, the average additional longevity is 14 years.¹¹

The purpose of this book project is to highlight what is currently known about how religious and spiritual engagement makes us better people. Does participation in religious and spiritual traditions, practices, and beliefs make us more loving, kind, compassionate, forgiving, humble, hopeful, grateful, good, and so forth? Does the Spirit, in other words, produce the fruit referred to in the quotation at the beginning of the chapter? Additionally, chapters in the book look at application of this research for a number of important health areas such as in cancer treatment, addiction treatment, and social justice in healthcare. Finally, one chapter offers a reflection on integrating spiritual and religious virtues into a long-running men's group.

Leading scholars, researchers, and thinkers, primarily in the psychology field, agreed to review the research that examines these fruits of the spirit. This book project is the fruit of this collaborative project among these remarkable colleagues.

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