

Charles Murray's recent commentary on life in Europe was rather an unintended and fascinating glimpse into the fears that conservatives have about our personal and social lives here in America.

By example, Murray opines that some people – liberal European secularists, in particular – seem to believe that "Human beings are a collection of chemicals...", and therefore "the purpose of life is to while away the intervening time..." But how does the latter assumption derive from the former fact?

Yes, we are a collection of chemicals, just as is the slime at the bottom of a pond. Does it follow then that humans and slime have the same moral, legal responsibilities and social status? I suspect both Mr. Murray and an ardent atheist such as myself would agree they do not. Clearly one can be a collection of chemicals and also much more than that.

More than a century ago it was believed that living matter required some "elans vital" or vital force to animate it. Today, organic chemistry fully explains living tissue without resorting to magical thinking. Mr. Murray and I agree that someday soon science will even be able to fully describe the complexity of animal cognitive abilities, including our own, without recourse to incorporeal spirits, magic fluids or divine sanction.

But this knowledge does not require us to abandon our hard won social structures, nor our familial and group altruistic behaviors, nor even our personal sense of morality or appreciation for our fleeting moment of existence.

Life indeed should not be about maximizing selfish pleasure. As Mr. Murray no doubt would agree, the most sustainable pleasures are obtained through the simple satisfaction of a job well done, caring for others, and otherwise getting involved with something bigger than one's self. We do not require church attendance to work towards the greater good.

Religion has historically tried to provide a structural foundation for the behavior of individuals, families and society and for that it is to be commended. But if lack of religion was detrimental to our cherished "values", then Mr. Murray needs to explain why these same secular European countries have fewer teenage pregnancies, less drug abuse, less divorce, and less violent crime.

Meanwhile, in the United States, these same trends are found in the so-called blue states that have some of the lowest levels of church attendance and religiosity in general. Should we take these studies at face value and conclude that religious belief leads to unwed mothers, crime and divorce?

I agree with Murray that stable, whole families are better than unstable, fragmented families. But I think he might also agree that a responsible and caring single parent is better than an abusive and neglectful husband and father and research has solidly demonstrated that the likelihood of being the latter increases with one's religiosity.

Science-based methods can be useful in determining which social programs are effective at maintaining not only healthy bodies, but also healthy families, and even well-lived lives. For instance, our recent history of conservative government policies which have conspired to keep working families only one health crisis away from bankruptcy might well explain why American families and companies struggle more than their European counterparts.

Science-based methods might also help us to determine why is it that The Netherlands, where marijuana is legal, has far fewer users of cannabis than the United States where it is illegal? Is this because the Dutch are smarter, better people than Americans? I doubt it. Perhaps, rather, social policies such as prohibition don't work because outlawing demand doesn't end the demand. It only makes the activity more risky and therefore more profitable.

Some, like Mr. Murray, might find it easier to threaten people with hellfire damnation or promises of eternal life than teach them that we should do unto others as they would do unto us – which all stable and healthy people have repeatedly rediscovered throughout history regardless of their religion or lack thereof.

It would be nice to believe that there is someone out there watching over each of us, someone who responds to our pleading and begging, rather than believing in living a self determined life and taking responsibility for our own failures and successes.

But we have a word for people who need someone to tell them the difference between right and wrong, for people who cannot take responsibility for their own actions and for the effects their actions have on the lives of others: they are called children.