

the weekly Standard

Religious Right and Left

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Given our inveterate mocking of the New York Times, we'd be remiss if we didn't draw attention to an incisive op-ed published in the paper's September 20 edition by the Cato Institute's Emily Ekins. The headline: "The Liberalism of the Religious Right."

Ekins upends the assumption that Donald Trump's most religious supporters are also his most ideologically fervent supporters. In a report published by the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, she finds that "religion appears to actually be moderating conservative attitudes, particularly on some of the most polarizing issues of our time: race, immigration and identity." Indeed, "churchgoing Trump voters have more favorable feelings toward African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, Muslims and immigrants compared with nonreligious Trump voters." The findings persist across demographic factors such as education and race.

This conclusion accords with what we've suspected for years: Sincere religious belief tends to give believers some assurance that the present life is not all there is and so inhibits them from adopting extreme beliefs in order to protect the nation they value from real or perceived threats. It doesn't always work that way, of course—some religious people are wackos—but in our experience it works that way more often than not. "Secular conservatives lack church membership to provide that sense of belonging and may succumb to the temptation to find it on the basis of their race or the nation," Ekins writes, "thereby bolstering white nationalism or the alt-right movement. We found that secular Trump voters are three times as likely as churchgoing Trump voters to say that their white racial identity is 'extremely' important to them; a majority of them report feeling like strangers in the country."

In one sense, it's a touch galling that Times readers need to be told that religious belief can make people more reasonable rather than less. Yet most liberal Times readers, we suspect, will interpret a vote for Donald Trump (even one motivated by a desire to keep Hillary Clinton from the presidency) as *prima facie* evidence of unthinking malice. Ekins has performed a service in reminding our liberal brethren that this is not so.

For her next study, we suggest an attempt to answer the question: Does religious belief tend to moderate progressives' views on race, immigration, and identity—or to aggravate their zealotry?