

Faith's benefits

From the Editors in the [January 27, 1999](#) issue

It seems that every few weeks we read another report touting the health benefits of being religious. Scientists have discovered, for example, that people who study the Bible, pray and go to church are less likely to have high blood pressure. Another study has found that smokers who go to church live longer than smokers who don't. One researcher has summed it up: "If you're a smoker, get your butt in church."

Linda George, a sociology professor at Duke, observes that "religious people have better support systems, which keep them healthier," and she suggests that "the sense of meaning and kind of comfort that religious beliefs provide make them more resistant to stresses, both physical and social." The interaction of faith and medicine is increasingly recognized as a legitimate area of scientific research. Dale Matthews of Georgetown Medical School notes that "the faith factor has been demonstrated to have value."

The media's accounts of these findings invariably take a solicitous tone toward the faithful, as if believers are bound to be gratified by medical evidence of religion's utilitarian value. In pondering why we were irritated by that tone, we realized why we are ambivalent about these reports. It's not that we don't think spiritual and physical health are somehow aligned (they certainly went together in Jesus' ministry); and it's not that we don't think the interaction of body and soul is a subject worthy of investigation. It's just that we don't like to see the therapists of well-being ushering people to the pews.

Perhaps no one is so simple as to start treating church like a nutritional supplement or a leafy green vegetable--something to add to one's life just to be on the safe side. Nevertheless, with their medically authorized praise of religion, the scientists subtly confirm their own cultural authority. In our society, it's the scientists, not the tellers of sacred stories, that get to define the "value" of the "faith factor." Their reports further inject the dangerous notion that faith is validated by its measurable outcomes. As long as one takes this view of faith, one will never get started on the actual journey of faith.

So we can be only halfheartedly enthusiastic about the prospect of scientists conducting tests to demonstrate the power of prayer or the clinical uses of forgiveness. As Kierkegaard once said, when we try to suck worldly wisdom from the movements of faith, we tend to swindle God out of the first movement.