

Subj: ***Sightings* 10/20/03 – Does Religion Make a Difference?**
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Sightings 10/20/03

Does Religion Make a Difference?
 – Martin E. Marty

Social scientists and news people who report on religion often get asked whether they are "pro" or "con" religion, or pro or con this or that religion. If they are fair-minded, as we expect them to be, they report on the highs and lows, the ups and downs, and the positives and negatives of religion in its effects on public life.

I thought of that this week while comparing two sets of graphs: those that chart beliefs and practices of publics in Europe, as reported by Andrew Greeley in his recent *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium*, and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for this year. Religious beliefs and practices *should* counter corruption and immorality.

The CPI measures bribery, kickbacks, graft, and other corruption in the business world, including multi-national corporations in 102 nations (from least corrupt to most corrupt). Among the twelve "least corrupt" – eight of them European nations – are several "least religious" nations: the post-Lutheran five, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, and Norway, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

Now consult Greeley's rankings on religious belief and practice: way down at 17, 18, 19, and 20 from the top are those northern "least corrupt" nations (Iceland was not measured) listed in the CPI. Do we correlate "least corrupt/least religious" and "more corrupt/more religious"? "More corrupt" nations include Cyprus, once-Catholic Ireland, Poland, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Spain, and Austria. These were ranked in the top eight in belief and religious practices. Only "most religious" Austria and Ireland show up in the top 24 "least corrupt."

Of course, Transparency International's CPI only measures business elites. It may be that the ordinary folks in these various nations reveal a different story. Still, it would be nice to think that the language of pulpit and prayer would also shape morality and promote non-corruption among elites in the high-believing nations. By the way, the United States, which prides itself on its religious belief and identification ("God bless America"), morality, and monitoring of business, came in at 14.

A different evidence of religious emphasis in public life: Nicholas D. Kristof's column "When Prudery Kills; Bush Dithers as Africans Die" (*New York Times* October 8) claims that African nations suffer most from AIDS. There, as the President said, "We have the opportunity to save millions of lives abroad from a terrible disease," but we are lagging. "Doing almost nothing," "essentially accomplishing nothing," leaders in Africa report to Kristof.

Kristof argues with, I believe, demonstrable warrant that U.S. refusal to back programs involving birth control – condoms most of all – which could lower the disease rate, is the result of response to religious pressures. "Restricting funds to abstinence, and nothing more, looks as if the administration is more interested in showing that it shares the Christian Right's sexual squeamishness than in fighting AIDS." The Christian Right is not alone among the churches in their anti-condom, anti-birth control "squeamishness." If Kristof and others who report are correct in this case, religious belief and practice *do* have a bearing on policies that affect the lives and deaths of millions.