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MIND & MATTER

In Tough Times, Religion Can Offer a Sturdy Shelter

Many recent studies have shown that religious observance can strengthen resilience to stress and illness



ILLUSTRATION: TOMASZ WALENTA

By *Melvin Konner*

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Zealots in our time have spilled enough blood in the name of religion that some authors—for instance, the late Christopher Hitchens in “God Is Not Great”—have blamed religious feeling itself for evil deeds. But a flood of recent research has shown how faith strengthens resilience to stress, including illness. A new study extends that research to Mexican immigrants in the U.S.

Strikingly, many of these studies on faith have come out over the past few years. Some are U.S.-based: Research published in May found that among over 5,000 American adults, regular churchgoers had better physiological stress measures and lower mortality. The Black Women’s Health Study reported in April that it had found a similar mortality benefit among 36,600 women. A 2015 article on 32,000 cancer patients found better physical health in those with greater religion and spirituality.

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The effects transcend borders and particular religions. Among 37,000 patients in Japan, the more religious had fewer cardiovascular risk factors and were less likely to get diabetes; likewise Orthodox Christians in Greece. Religiousness was associated with better compliance in dialysis patients

in Saudi Arabia; in Northern India, Hindu identification predicted better stress coping. Both Buddhist and Muslim women in Thailand managed their diabetes better if they were religious. Even in secular Denmark, religion protected health.

Mary Read-Wahidi and Jason DeCaro, anthropologists at the University of Alabama, explored the stresses of immigration in Scott County, Miss., publishing their work in May in the *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. Between April and August 2013, the researchers systematically interviewed 60 Mexican immigrants sharing a devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe in the county, in the central part of the state. As earlier researchers had shown with African-American women facing racism and so many others around the world dealing with illness, religious observances moderate the stresses of life in a new country.

Anthropologists would call the Virgin of Guadalupe a master symbol—one that has many meanings and functions in people’s lives. Her following is particularly strong in Mexico, where, according to legend, she appeared in 1531 to a poor peasant named Juan Diego and—in winter—filled his cloak with flowers. Soon a local bishop and eventually the Catholic Church were persuaded by Juan’s account. The immigrants of Scott County identified with the humble Juan Diego and melded their religious feeling with strands of nationalism: He was indigenous, yet under Spanish colonialism he had become a stranger in a strange land.

Some of the immigrants in the study were undocumented, living in fear of discovery. Many were doing hard, dangerous work, and most didn’t have health insurance; Dr. DeCaro calls them “a deeply disempowered community.” The researchers tested them on the Immigration Stressor Scale, with questions like: How often do you feel lonely or isolated? How often do you worry about meeting the basic needs of your family? The subjects also rated their own well-being, physically and socially.

Additionally, the researchers developed a scale for “cultural consonance” with Guadalupan devotion—in other words, how many Guadalupan beliefs and practices the subjects adopted, such as keeping a statue of the Virgin in their homes or cars, pursuing the tradition of bringing her flowers (recalling her favor to Juan) or rating her annual festival as very important. Paths to high-consonance scores could vary, from praying to the Virgin regularly to attending communal events in her honor. Those with high cultural consonance were resilient to the effects of stress on well-being: Greater immigration-related stress wasn’t tied to worse physical or psychosocial outcomes. Those with low readings on the cultural consonance scale showed lower well-being with greater stress.

“Guadalupan devotion is buffering that negative effect,” Dr. Read-Wahidi said. Spiritually or psychologically, the Virgin of Guadalupe is helping her Scott County followers hang on.