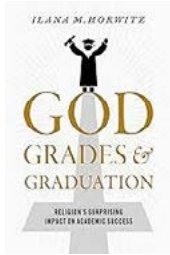


BOOK REVIEW



God, Grades, and Graduation: Religion's Surprising Impact on Academic Success

Ilana M. Horwitz (2022)
Oxford University Press, 264 pages
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The subtitle of this 2022 book gives a strong hint as to the interest it has sparked: *Religion's Surprising Impact on Academic Success*. The word 'surprising' is the indicator that what the author reports is not within what is considered 'normal' when exploring sociological influences on educational outcomes.

As Horwitz explains, the normal range of research parameters revolve around the triumvirate of race, income, and gender. That is, the expectation within the sociology of education is that your outcomes will at least be somewhat or majorly influenced by your ethnic context, the money that is earned within that context, and the expectations adhered to your gender. Horwitz uses the apparently well-received labels of 'concerted cultivation' and the 'accomplishment of natural growth' to explain this accepted sociological paradigm. The former is about families in higher SES structuring life towards educational and financial success; the latter is about less well-off families who 'live and let live', but whose children therefore do not do as well because of the increased influence of risk factors.

Horwitz did not commence her research to disprove any of these normal patterns of correlation within educational research. Her interest, as reported by her, was in considering one sociological dynamic that is still very present in the USA, but which seemed to be under-represented in studies to explore its possible influence on educational outcomes. Horwitz noted that about 50% of people in the USA still believe in God in some sincere manner. Thus, she posited that:

What's missing from the story [of young people doing well academically, against the odds] is God. ... about one in four teenagers has a deep relationship with God [in the USA]. Their relationship with God is reinforced over and over again because they are socially embedded in

church communities during some of the most important years of child development. (p. 6)

We could speculate on why other researchers have been blind to this part of sociological life for young people, but that would detract from the focus of this review. The purpose of this piece is understanding what Horwitz found when she decided to make a careful review of the impact of this religious embeddedness of about twenty-five percent of the youth in the USA, with particular reference to impacts on their education. To achieve this different understanding, Horwitz drew on ten years of survey data with over three thousand teenagers and over two hundred interviews.

Here are some of the key themes that Horwitz describes from her research that were clearer and stronger than she imagined, and which have led to apparent surprise in the sociology of education field.

Describing Abiders

If the labels of 'concerted cultivation' and the 'accomplishment of natural growth' do not fit with Horwitz's observations, what descriptor could she use and stay faithful to the data as she saw it? Her new term is 'abiders'. These are young people "who say they believe *and* belong." (p. 14) That is, their statement of faith was lived out in two critical ways – there was an adult who also believed and belonged in their family, and with this adult, the teen was involved in their local congregation in some meaningful way. For Horwitz, this is not tokenism. She identifies it as families being "intensely religious" (p. 13).

Part of Horwitz's focus is understanding why such religious commitment might be helpful during 'the normal' times of risk during adolescence. Instead of the 'concerted cultivation' of those in a particular economic category, Horwitz used the term of a "religious restraint" (p. 14) to describe the childrearing style of the parents in these households during this developmental period of life for the teens.

Helping Teens Navigate Risk through Religious Restraint

A term like religious restraint can evoke images of harshness or legalism. However, Horwitz describes something different, particularly as she reflects on the many interviews with these teens. Because the faith of the parent(s) is sincere, and the faith

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of the teen follows in like vein, Horwitz proposes that respect for God leads to relational respect for these young people. That respect includes looking out for each other, and respect for self before God.

This taking to heart of teachings from the Bible is described as establishing “God’s guardrails” to life. What was unexpected for Horwitz was how this dynamic had an impact, regardless of other sociological markers:

... abider’s close friends are much less likely to use alcohol and drugs, and much less likely to get in trouble for cheating, fighting or skipping school than nonabiders’ friends. This holds true even after controlling for gender, race, and parents’ education and income. (p. 102)

She summarises this way of living through the teen years as “following God’s path rather than striking out on one’s own” (p. 148).

Abiding Impact on Grades

Why did living differently – following God – lead to better academic outcomes in terms of graduating and going onto tertiary programs for these faith abiding students? Horwitz did *not* find that believing in God sincerely made students cleverer. She described her conclusion being derived from tracking that it was because students were better at “following the rules” (p. 73).

What did this look like? Horwitz, who sometimes describes her ‘abiders’ as “religiously restrained students living life for God” (p. 175), found that these students were conscientious and cooperative. This translated to supporting the efforts of the teacher, which also meant looking out for others (what she termed being ‘agreeable’). Again, the surprise of studying this dynamic for Horwitz was in the breadth of the effect:

This is the case regardless of students’ social class upbringing. Working-class abiders have better grades than working class nonabiders. Middle-class abiders have better grades than middle-class nonabiders, and so on. (p. 175)

And After School?

The surprises continued for Horwitz as she followed the post-school data. In line with the pattern she described at the school level, and as asserted in the quote above, Horwitz did find that abiding-faith students did do better at the school level and graduated to college (undergraduate studies) more than non-abiders.

However, this did not necessarily lead to

abiders going onto the more elite post-graduate courses at university. Horwitz found that the faith of the abiders seemed to be once again in play in their decision making. She describes that faith, family beliefs and commitments make abiders to be less ambitious in a career and financial sense. Rather, they tend to more often follow career options that enable them to establish stable families embedded in a sincere faith community. In this, they seem to be willing to earn less in order to “maximise their time with family even if they aren’t as prestigious or lucrative” (p. 179). This family-making pattern seems to follow more traditional roles for men and women compared to non-abiders.

Does this mean that abiders do not do as well interpersonally, in terms of what a Western secular world might judge as being ‘successful’? Again, the freeing aspect of living for God seems to have an impact, as indicated by this closing description by Horwitz:

As emerging adults, abiders experienced fewer symptoms of emotional, physical and cognitive despair. ... On all indicators, abiders across social class groups fared better than nonabiders. ... abiders are significantly less likely to experience emotional, cognitive, or physical despair. They feel less anxious, healthier, and more optimistic about life. Without a doubt, their deep relationship with God helps them overcome several challenges they bump up against. Abiders are simply more resilient. This is driven by their involvement in a religious social community but also their steadfast belief in God. (p. 180)

Perhaps we can take Horwitz’s research as an affirmation of the work of Christian families, churches, and schools. And for those of us who minister in the last one – Christian schools – may we also be challenged to keep the Christian basics in place, and keep our school communities supportive of the abiders in God, fulfilling His purpose], “I came that they might have life, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows]” (John 10:10 AMP). Amen. **TEACH**

References

Horwitz, L.M. (2022). *God, Grades and Graduation: Religion’s Surprising Impact on Academic Success*. Oxford University Press.

Editor’s note: “Stephen’s latest books is called *Why Good Thinking Starts with God*, published by Ambassador International”.

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Why did living differently – following God – lead to better academic outcomes?
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