

Youth Culture Lesson
Finding Teachable Moments in Culture
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How Tweet It Is: Christians Happier than Atheists on Twitter
By Paul Asay

What Happened:

Are Christians happier than people who don't have faith? A new study from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign suggests the answer is yes—at least on Twitter.

For the study, researchers combed through nearly 2 million tweets from more than 16,000 users. They determined who was a Christian or atheist user through who they were likely to follow: Christians in the study followed people such as Pope Benedict XVI, Joel Osteen and Rick Warren. Atheists followed famous atheists such as Michael Shermer, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris.

Using a special program to locate key words, researchers found that Christians were more likely to use words in their 140-character missives such as love, happy, great and friend. Atheists? They more often used words such as bad, wrong and awful. Of course, they also tended to use more analytical words, too, such as reason and question.

Clearly, this study doesn't say atheism makes people grumpy, but it's still suggestive. The researchers say Christians tend to be intuitive thinkers that often belong to a "tight-knit moral community." People who have strong relationships such as those that usually are found in such communities tend to be happier.

While atheists tend to have strong analytical skills, those very attributes can diminish an atheist's capability to be optimistic or summon the confidence often associated with good mental health.

Ryan Ritter, a student who helped conduct the study, is himself an atheist. The intent of the study wasn't to prove that religion makes people happier. They want to find out why. "If we can understand the factors that facilitate happiness (e.g., increased social support), ideally we can use these insights to increase well-being for believers and nonbelievers alike," he wrote to CNN.

Of course, believers might say their happiness isn't just due to social support that church or youth groups might offer. Communing with the Creator of the universe might be enough to make anyone happy.

Talk About It:

Do you think Christians really are happier than atheists? If so, why? Are there other reasons besides the social support and intuitive thinking the researchers stressed? Is a study based on words used on Twitter a fair examination of a person's state of mind?

If Christians are happier in general than atheists, they're not always happy. We get angry, sad and hurt as does everybody. Do Christians have tools to help them move past bad times more easily, effectively or quickly than atheists? What are some of them?

Do you use Twitter? If so, what sort of things do you talk about there? Do you share lighter moments of your life? Do you talk about your hopes and fears? Do you think people try to be more optimistic on Twitter in general? More pessimistic?

What the Bible Says:

“I know there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God” (Eccl. 3:12-13).

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me” (John 14:1).

“Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him” (Ps. 34:8).

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3-10)

Paul Asay has covered religion for *The Washington Post*, *Christianity Today*, Beliefnet.com and *The (Colorado Springs) Gazette*. He writes about culture for *Plugged In* and wrote the Batman book [God on the Streets of Gotham](#) (Tyndale). He lives in Colorado Springs with wife Wendy and his two children. Follow him on Twitter @AsayPaul.