

# ‘God, Grades, and Graduation’ Review: A Faithful Way to Learn

Religious communities teach the importance of respecting authority and being cooperative. Such lessons can boost classroom performance.

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What kind of child does well in school? The answer is hardly surprising: one who has respect for authority, an ability to get along with fellow students, a stable family, exposure to responsible adults and a feeling of hope. These days, in the U.S., such characteristics are more often found among middle- and upper-class children than among less-well-off students. What if there were one particular element in a child’s experience that could foster such characteristics in everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status?

In “God, Grades, and Graduation,” Ilana Horwitz suggests that religion can play such a role. Of course, nothing is simple, and Ms. Horwitz’s analysis is anything but reductive or unnuanced. But she finds a rich store of data to support such a claim in the National Study of Youth and Religion, a large-scale longitudinal survey run by the University of Notre Dame. Young people who are “abiders”—that is, who are active in religious communities and who have adopted their family’s faith as their own—“are likely to have an academic advantage because religion and schools are complementary institutions.” In particular, “adolescents who thrive in one institution are likely to thrive in the other.”

The academic advantage of this affinity may not be large for those who grow up in a professional class—their cultural norms are already likely to lead them to graduate from high school and go on to college. But middle-class and working-class children benefit notably. (The very poor face so many obstacles that no single element, however helpful it might be in itself, is likely to have a big effect.) Among the

survey's participants, the probability of getting grades of all or mostly A's was about 10% higher among abiders than among non-religious students in the same socioeconomic group. Lest 10% seem an unimpressive ratio, Ms. Horwitz emphasizes its significance. "Abiders have about the same amount of academic advantage over nonabiders," she writes, "as students in the top 25% of the socioeconomic distribution have over students in the bottom 25%." Talk about closing an achievement gap!

Ms. Horwitz, a professor at Tulane University, neatly shows why qualities that make people abiders also make them good at school—e.g., the ability to follow instructions and be cooperative—and she quotes from survey participants to give her analysis some immediacy. Jacob, as an adolescent, describes the ways in which religion keeps him from doing "immoral things and bad things." His manner toward adults, Ms. Horwitz says, "reflects his religious upbringing." He doesn't manipulate them, she notes; he tries to please them. Indeed, showing teachers respect is one key aspect of "the abider advantage," Ms. Horwitz says. Years later, Jacob tells the survey interviewers, referring to his professional success, that it wasn't smarts that got him ahead but effort: "You just have to work hard."

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Luca, by contrast, is a student whose parents, over time, invested "less and less in his religious upbringing," letting him pick his "own religion"; eventually he drifted away from church altogether. His classroom attitude was similarly noncommittal: "I don't try at all. I really don't. I don't pay attention in class and I don't study for tests." He passes his classes despite a lackadaisical attitude, believing that he has "cracked the code" for manipulating adults. As Ms. Horwitz notes, Luca "is succeeding at school while still doing what he wants on the side, signifying low respect for authority." As Jacob and Luca get older, their paths diverge, the former becoming a doctor, the latter dropping out of college.

One surprising finding of Ms. Horwitz's work is that abiders who grow up in the professional class often achieve a lower level of academic success, measured by affiliation with a prestige institution, than one might expect; that is, religiously observant students do quite well in high school but then choose to attend a school that is less selective than other schools they could reasonably expect to get into (based on SAT scores and other such criteria). Why? They want schools closer to home, for instance, because they place a high importance on family. They are less concerned about achieving at the highest levels of their professions because other things matter more. As Ms. Horwitz explains about one participant: "Her self-concept revolves around starting a family, helping others, and orientating her life around God. New and unsettling experiences designed to further one's career aspirations are incongruent with her sense of self."

"God, Grades, and Graduation" is a perceptive work of sociological portraiture and analysis. Even so, it prompts a couple of questions. The first is why Ms. Horwitz, while discussing Jewish teens, takes a different approach: Instead of looking at Jewish abiders vs. non-abiders—that is, predominantly Orthodox Jews who are active in Jewish life vs. those who describe their Judaism in cultural terms—she takes up Jewish students as a category in themselves (defined as anyone born to at least one Jewish parent), noting, for instance, that Jews generally don't experience the college "undermatching" of other professional-class abiders. But religious Jews tend to place a high value on the same things that other professional-class abiders do, and their academic arc may be similar. It's a possibility that would have been worth investigating.

The second question concerns religious messaging, a topic that Ms. Horwitz leaves largely unexplored. There are faith communities that place a high value on educational success, like the Mormons, while others, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, have been known to discourage it. The academic outcomes of abiders may be affected by the urgency of evangelizing in their churches, for instance, or by the expectation that they separate themselves from secular institutions like

nonreligious schools. Still, Ms. Horwitz has packed so many insights into this small volume it is hard to fault her for not offering more.

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