

Religious Engagement and the Good Life

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Abstract

In response to a Gallup World Poll, 2 in 3 humans declared that “religion is important” in their daily lives. Is this religiosity for better or worse? Is religion “one of the world’s great evils” (Dawkins)? Or do evolutionary psychologists rightly infer that religion serves adaptive purposes (fostering morality, social cohesion, and group survival)?

In human history, religion has been associated both with great evils (from yesterday’s Crusades to today’s gay-bashing and ISIS beheadings) and with great good (the founding of hospitals, universities, hospices, and anti-slavery movements). It is a “stunning historical paradox,” Stephen Jay Gould observed, “that organized religion has fostered, throughout Western history, both the most unspeakable horrors and the most heartrending examples of human goodness.”

Still we wonder: On balance, is religious engagement today associated more with the good life or with misery? More with prosocial generosity of time and money, or with greed? More with human virtues such as humility and forgiveness, or with self-serving pride? More with health and longevity, or with stress and illness? More with happiness and life satisfaction, or with repression and depression?

Big data from varied sources reveal a curious *religious engagement paradox*: Religious engagement correlates *negatively* with well-being across aggregate levels (when comparing more vs. less religious countries or American states), yet *positively* across individuals (especially within relatively more religious places). Said simply, actively religious individuals *and* irreligious places, are generally flourishing. (Similarly paradoxical aggregate versus individual level findings will be offered from other domains.)

“Does religion do more harm or good?” In response to this perennial question, posed by *The Economist* for a 2010 debate, partisans offer potent examples of religion’s horrors and heroes.

Mindful of yesterday’s Crusades and today’s Islamic State beheadings and the anti-gay religious right, one can understand why Richard Dawkins (1997) declared that “Faith is one of the world’s great evils” and why Christopher Hitchens would subtitle his *God is Not Great* as *How Religion Poisons Everything*. From the genocide of Kosovo Muslims to the religion-enabled terror of September 11, 2001, history leaves little doubt: Religion at its worst is toxic.

But then religion’s defenders remind us of atheism at its worst (as in the genocides of Stalin and Mao) and of religion at its best—of its Martin Luther Kings and Desmond Tutus, and of faith-enabled hospitals, orphanages, hospices, and universities. Moreover, there are the clear justice mandates: Love God and neighbor, even those who persecute you. And the ideals—“the fruit of the Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Religion is “the source of life’s deepest perversions,” argued theologian Langdon Gilkey (1966), but also “the ground of its only hope.”

Historical happenings aside (malevolence and morality, cruelty and compassion, arise from people of all faiths and none) is the religious life, on balance, more heartless or humane? Is religion, as Freud assumed in *the Future of an Illusion*, an “obsessional neurosis” that engenders sexually repressed, guilt-laden, unhappy lives? Or was St. Paul closer to truth in writing that “the kingdom of God is . . . righteousness and peace and joy?”

Setting aside recent research on the virtues embraced by major religions such as forgiveness, humility, and gratitude, let’s first glimpse what we have gleaned from extensive studies of religiosity and a) happiness, b) health, and c) prosocial behavior. (Spoiler alert: The

associations are mostly positive, across individuals.) Then let's examine a paradoxically reverse finding—negative associations across places (nations or states).¹

Happiness

My first exposure to the faith-happiness correlation came from the Gallup Organization's (1984) "Religion in America" surveys. People highest in "spiritual commitment" (who consistently agreed with statements such as "God loves me even though I may not always please him" and "My religious faith is the most important influence in my life") were twice as likely to report being "very happy" as those least spiritually committed.

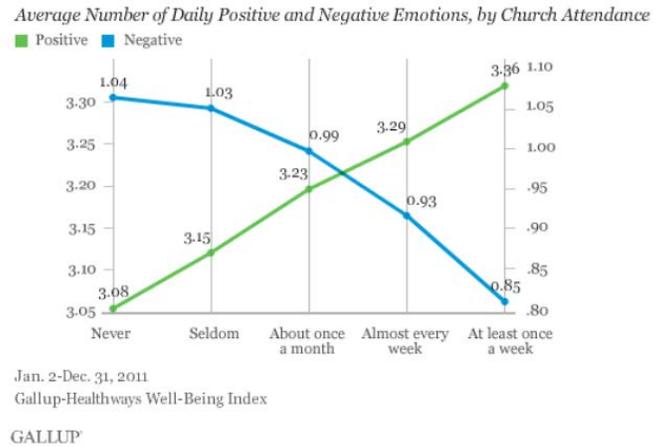
Ensuing survey research replicated the association:

- In a follow-up Gallup survey, 55 percent of "engaged" U.S. congregation members reported being "completely satisfied with the conditions of my life," as did 25 percent of those "actively disengaged" (Winseman, 2002).
- A slew of 1980s studies, meta-analyzed by Morris Okun and William Stock (1987), found that the two best predictors of well-being among older persons were health and religious engagement.
- In General Social Surveys (tinyurl.com/generalsocialsurvey), 42 percent of Americans who "feel God's presence" daily have reported being "very happy," as have 24 percent of those never feeling God's presence.
- Gallup's newer daily surveys reached 676,080 Americans in 2009 and 2010. "Very religious" adults reported higher overall psychological and physical "well-being" than did

¹ Studies of religion's associations with things good and bad have no bearing on its truth claims. Are religious people committed to an illusion, perhaps hooked on a mental opiate? Or are they apprehending transcendent truths? This chapter speaks to the debate over whether religion does more harm or good, but not to the debate between theism and atheism.

those “moderately religious” and nonreligious (Newport, Witters, & Argrawal, 2010, 2012). “Very religious Americans are doing very well,” reported the Gallup team. They “have higher overall wellbeing, lead healthier lives, and are less likely to have ever been diagnosed with depression . . .”

- In 2011 surveys (Figure 1), Gallup further found that day-to-day positive emotions increased with more frequent religious attendance (and negative emotions decreased).



But of course mere correlations do not indicate which way the traffic flows between religiosity and well-being. Perhaps happiness somehow enhances religiosity (though one could as easily imagine that depression or anxiety would drive people to find solace in religion). So one research team mined 20 years of data from a German study that has followed more than 12,000 lives through time (Headey, Schupp, Tucci, & Wagner, 2010). Their finding: “Individuals who become more religious over time record long term gains in life satisfaction, while those who become less religious record long term losses.” Thus, they surmised, “Religious beliefs and activities can make a substantial difference to life satisfaction.”

If that is so, what explains it? Unpacking “the religious factor,” social scientists have noted these ingredients:

- 1) *Social support.* Religious engagement provides, first, a support community—indeed, some 350,000 such communal support systems in, for example, the United States (Hartford, 2016). Supportive faith communities help meet the human need to belong. “The fellowship

of kindred spirits,” “the bearing of one another’s burdens,” “the ties of love that bind” are intrinsic to faith communities. As John Winthrop (1630/1965, p. 92) explained to his Puritan followers before they disembarked to their New World, “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.”

- 2) *Meaning and purpose.* Faith also offers people a sense of life’s meaning and purpose—and with it, a sense of coherence, identity, and behavioral guidance (Canada, Murphy, Fitchett, & Stein, 2016; Park, Edmonson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). Faith satisfies “the most fundamental human need of all,” wrote Rabbi Harold Kushner (1987). “That is the need to know that somehow we matter, that our lives mean something, count as something more than just a momentary blip in the universe.”
- 3) *Impulse control.* All the health and well-being measures predicted by religious engagement are also predicted by self-control and self-regulation, observed Michael McCullough and Brian Willoughby (2009). Indeed, they document, religiosity promotes self-monitoring and self-control, which promotes positive self-regulation.
- 4) *Self-acceptance.* Theologian Paul Tillich (1988) speculated that believing that God loves you, just as you are, provides a foundation for self-worth (independent of achievements or others’ approval). “*Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!* . . . If that happens to us, we experience grace.”
- 5) *Terror management.* Writing from a place called Hope, I am mindful that some religious worldviews encourage an ultimate hope, especially when confronting the “terror” that accompanies our awareness of our vulnerability and impending death (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015). Most faiths offer a hope that, no matter what adversity may strike, in the end—the very end—“all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well” (Julian of Norwich, 1395/2016, p. 49). Such hope empowered Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964), even when facing the terror of threats on his

life, to say, “If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.”

By controlling for these and other mediating influences, could we squeeze the juice out of the religion factor and conclude that religiosity is “nothing but” the combined effect of social support, meaning, impulse control, and so forth? Psychologically speaking, yes, albeit in the same sense that a hurricane’s effect is nothing more than the effect of its subfactors, such as wind, rain, and storm surge. Control for such and there’s no real “hurricane effect” per se (much as there is no religiosity effect per se). Religiosity and hurricanes are package variables, with multiple subfactors.

Health

Throughout history, religion and medicine have collaborated, sometimes through the same person. In the 12th century, Maimonides was both a rabbi and physician. Hospitals often began in monasteries and were spread by missionaries. The Catholic Church remains one of the largest global health care providers, with 5,246 hospitals and 15,208 houses for the chronically ill and those with disabilities (Brown, 2014).

As medical science matured, religion and medicine diverged. With vaccines to spare children from smallpox and antibiotics to relieve fever, people turned to medicine before prayer. Now, in the 21st century, religion and medicine have reconnected. In a Medline search, the word root “religio” appeared in 6,751 abstracts in the 35 years from 1965 to 1999, and in 16,562 abstracts in the fewer 16+ years from 2000 to 2016.

Are there fires (solid findings) beneath all this smoke? Several epidemiological studies, each tracking thousands of lives through years of time, reveal an association between religious engagement and health or longevity.

- *Kibbutz communities*. Jeremy Kark and his co-researchers (1996) compared the 16-year death rates of those in religiously Orthodox or matched nonreligious Israeli

collective settlements. Their finding: “Belonging to a religious collective was associated with a strong protective effect” (roughly equal to the gender mortality difference) that was unexplained by age or economic differences.

- *Men’s and women’s longevity.* The religiosity-longevity correlation occurs among men, and even more strongly among women—and so is not merely a result of women’s being both more religious and longer-lived (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000; McCullough & Laurenceau, 2005; VanderWeele, 2017).

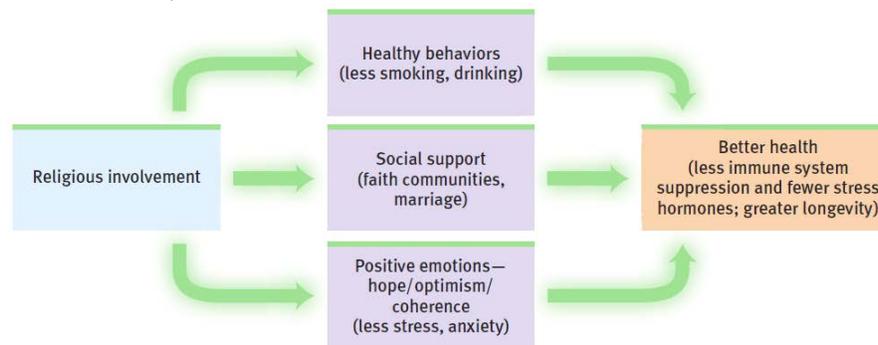
Three examples:

- When 5,286 Californians were followed over 28 years (with controls for gender, age, ethnicity, and education), frequent religious attendees were 36 percent less likely to have died in any year (Oman, Kurata, Strawbridge, & Cohen, 2002; Strawbridge, Cohen, & Shema, 1997).
- A U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-financed National Health Interview Survey similarly followed 21,204 adults over eight years. After controlling for gender, age, race, and region, religious non-attenders were 1.9 times more likely to have died than were weekly attenders (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999). This translated into an eight year life-expectancy difference from age 20.
- Among 74,534 women assessed in 1992 in the Nurses’ Health Study, the most regular religious attenders were—after controlling for various health risk factors—33 percent less likely to die in the ensuing 20 years (Li et al., 2016).
- *Suicide risk.* In 1996, Tyler VanderWeele and his colleagues (2016) recorded religious attendance among 89,708 women participants in the Nurses’ Health Study. In the ensuing 14+ years, those reporting weekly or more attendance had a dramatically lower suicide rate than did non-attenders (1 versus 7 per 100,000 person years). More religious countries also have less suicide (Pelham & Nyiri, 2008).

Harvard epidemiologist and biostatistician Tyler VanderWeele (2017) concludes that “religious participation . . . is a powerful social determinant of health.” Again we wonder: why? What explains these consistent findings?

- *Healthier behaviors.* Religiously engaged people smoke and drink less (Lyons, 2002; Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, & Kaplan, 2001).
- *Social support.* As with happiness, social support contributes to health—and also to healthy behaviors (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002). For example, religious engagement encourages marriage, which is another predictor of health and longevity.
- *Stress protection and enhanced well-being.* Even after controlling for unhealthy behaviors, social ties, gender, and preexisting health problems, much of the religiosity-associated mortality reduction remains (George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000; Powell, Schahabi, & Thoresen, 2003). Researchers have speculated, for example, that a coherent worldview, a sense of hope, happiness, and meditation practices may reduce stress (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Possible explanations for the religiosity-longevity association (from Myers & DeWall, 2016).



Helping Behaviors

Even nontheists have clashing presumptions regarding whether religion undermines or enhances prosociality. Religion, argued Christopher Hitchens (2007, p. 56), “is violent, irrational, intolerant,

allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children.” But then evolutionists such as David Sloan Wilson (2003, 2007), E. O. Wilson (1998) and their interpreters (Robert Wright and Nicholas Wade), have argued the opposite—that religion is widespread because it is socially adaptive. It fosters morality, social cohesion, and group survival. Religious conviction, noted E. O. Wilson (p. 244), “is largely beneficent. [It] nourishes, love, devotion, and above all, hope.”

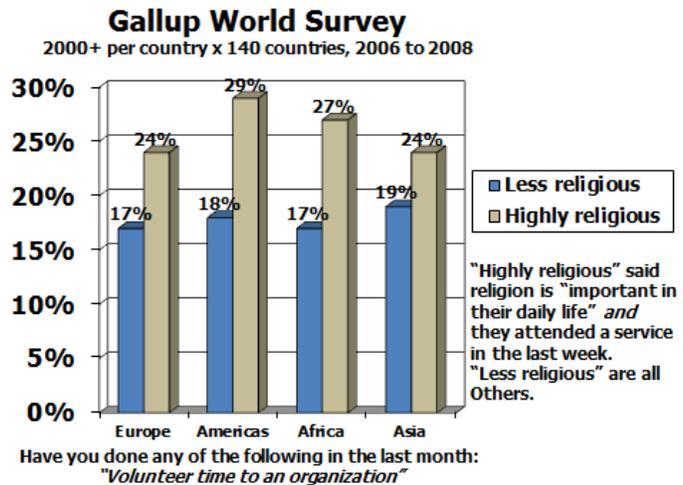
In their surveys of Israeli Jews, Spanish Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Dutch Calvinists, and German Lutherans and Catholics, Shalom Schwartz and Sipke Huismans (1995) found that, in each case, those religiously engaged people expressed less hedonism and self-orientation. Religions “exhort people to pursue causes greater than their personal desires.” Such interfaith self-sacrificial compassion was memorably illustrated by the World War II Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish “Four Chaplains,” who, with their torpedoed ship sinking into icy waters, each gave away their life jackets and were last seen, with arms linked, saying their final prayers (fourchaplains.org). In the U.S., the General Social Survey (tinyurl.com/generalsocialsurvey) found that “volunteering tied to community service” was felt to be an “important obligation” by 16 percent of adults attending religious services less than annually, and by 38 percent of those attending weekly or more.

Other studies also have found “that religious belief is positively associated with moral concern” (Jack, Friedman, Boyatzis, & Taylor, 2016). But talk is cheap. Will religiously engaged folks enact the compassion and love they espouse? Luke Galen (2012) thinks not. Religious people, he argues, display ingroup bias (favoring their own religion) and offer less support for public (government) charity.

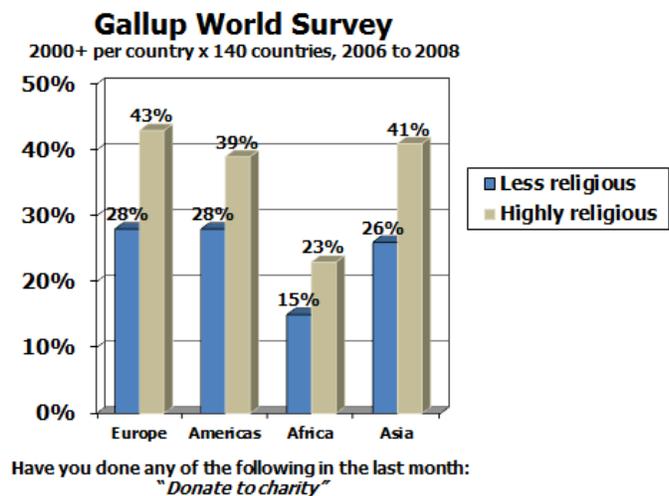
Volunteerism. Religious people *do*, however, exhibit elevated levels of volunteerism and of charitable giving. In repeated U.S. Gallup surveys (1984, 2013; Colasanto, 1989; Wuthnow,

1994), religiously engaged or “highly spiritually committed” people have reported substantially greater volunteerism, such as among the infirm, the poor, or the elderly. And in European Values Surveys and World Values Surveys of 117,007 people, “People who attend church twice a week are more than 5 times more likely to volunteer than people who never visit church,” reported Stijn Ruiter and Nan Dirk De Graaf (2006).

Dwarfing other surveys, however, are the Gallup World Poll’s big data from more than a quarter million respondents (Pelham & Crabtree, 2008). In every world region, highly religious people were substantially more likely to report volunteering in the past month (Figure 3).



Charitable giving. Repeated surveys reveal that the jest, “When it comes to giving, some people stop at nothing,” is seldom true of religiously engaged Americans. In one Gallup survey, repeated in follow-up years, the 24 percent of people who were weekly attenders gave 48 percent of all charitable contributions (Center for Global Prosperity, 2007; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1992; Hodgkinson, Weitzman, & Kirsch, 1990). Newer, global data confirm the faith-philanthropy association (Figure 4).



Robert Putnam and David Campbell's (2010) national survey data concur with earlier surveys:

Religiously observant Americans are more generous with time and treasure than demographically similar secular Americans. This is true for secular causes (especially help to the needy, the elderly, and young people) as well as for purely religious causes. It is true even for most random acts of kindness. . . . And the pattern is so robust that evidence of it can be found in virtually every major national survey of American religious and social behavior. Any way you slice it, religious people are simply more generous. (pp. 453–454)

Is the greater giving by those “highly religious” enabled by their greater income? To the contrary, reported the Gallup World Poll researchers (Pelham & Crabtree, 2008). Those highly religious tend to have *lower* incomes. Thus, they concluded, “The data presented here offer compelling evidence of the role of religious dedication in helping to encourage supportive, community-oriented behaviors” In experiments, priming religious cognition (such as by unscrambling sentences with words such as *God*, *spirit*, and *sacred*) also has increased participants' generosity (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007).

But this research story is unfinished. To further explore the religiosity-prosociality relationship, perhaps we could ask:

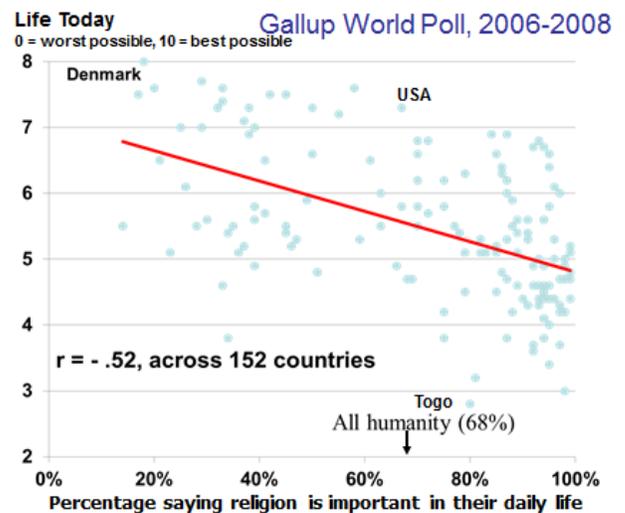
- Who is most likely to adopt children and provide foster care?
- Who mentors at-risk children, ex-prisoners, and immigrants?
- Who provides disaster relief, by volunteering time and resources after catastrophes?
- Who seeks prosocial careers, as in human service work and teaching?
- Who includes a substantial charitable component in their estate planning?
- Who is most at risk for antisociality (crime and delinquency)?

The Religious Engagement Paradox

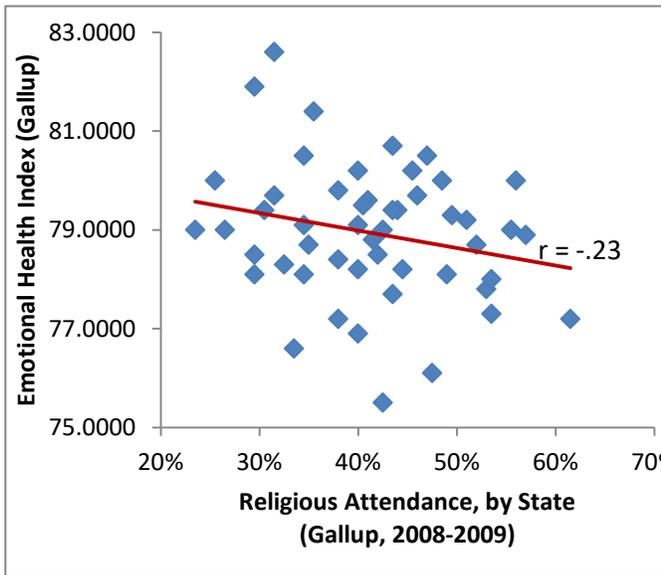
I began by noting that, historically, religions have at times exemplified the love, peace, and justice they profess, and at other times quite the opposite. Extrinsically motivated religion has even, at times, provided self-justification—by thinking God is on one's side—for ingroup bias, opposition to equal rights for women and sexual minorities, and war. Yet religious engagement, especially in the relatively religious Western countries such as the U.S., correlates positively with happiness, health, and helping behaviors.

But now the plot thickens, for these positive associations between religious engagement and the good life are *reversed* when comparing more versus less religious *places* (nations or states) rather than individuals. Said differently, religious engagement correlates *positively* with well-being across *individuals* and *negatively* across *places*. Simply put, religious individuals and irreligious places are generally flourishing.

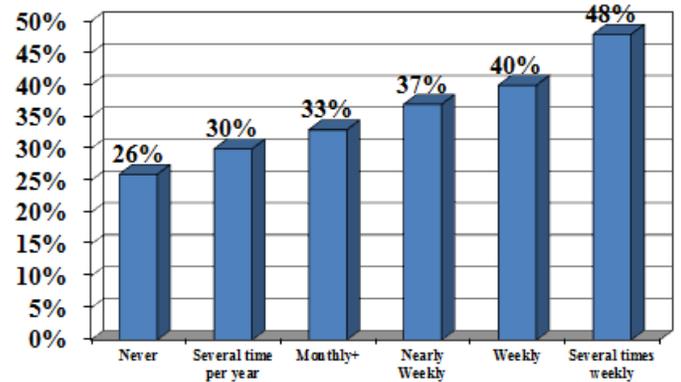
Before reflecting on this startling assertion, consider the evidence. For starters, I harvested Gallup World Poll data from 152 countries and discovered a striking *negative* correlation between these countries' population percentage declaring that religion is "important in your daily life" and their average life satisfaction score (Figure 5). Ergo, despite the religiosity/good life associations noted above, at the aggregate (country) level, religious engagement is associated with the bad life.



Emotional well-being. Turning to U.S. data (Figures 6 and 7), I observed that, across states, religious attendance rates predict modestly *lower* emotional well-being. (The attendance data come from Gallup surveys of 706,888 Americans [Newport, 2010] and the emotional health data from Gallup-Healthway surveys asking people if yesterday they felt treated with respect all day, smiled and laughed a lot, learned or did something interesting, and experienced enjoyment, worry, sadness, stress, anger, happiness, and depression.) Yet across individuals, religious attendance predicts substantially *greater* happiness (tinyurl.com/generalsocialsurvey; see also Inglehart, 1990, and Australian Centre on Quality of Life, 2008 for data from other countries).

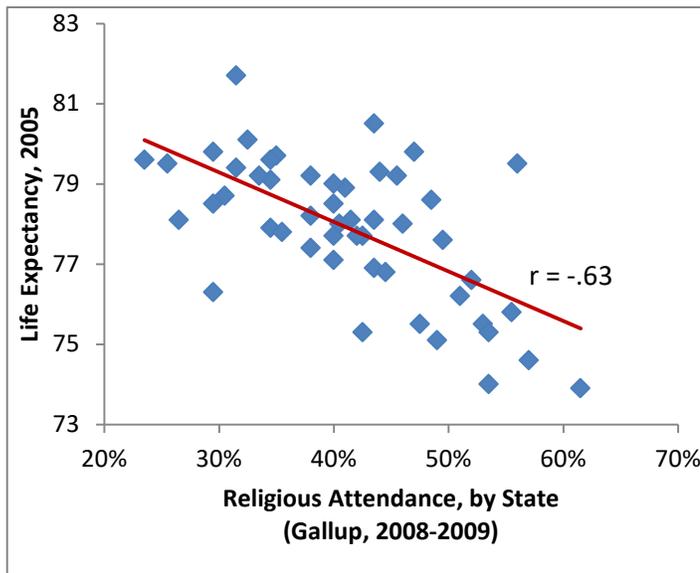


% Very Happy and Religious Attendance (n=54,416, NORC, 1972-2014)

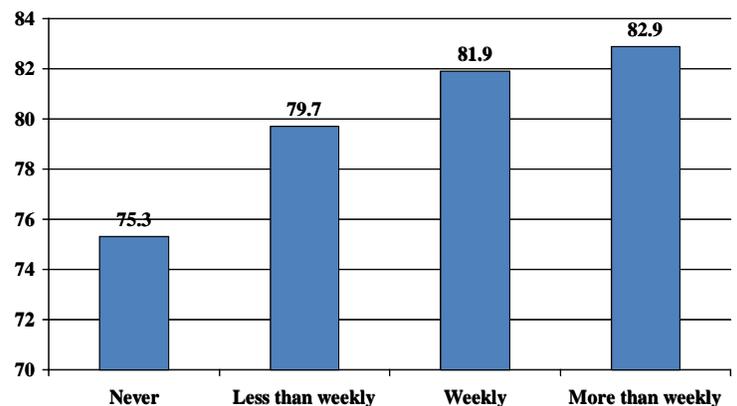


Life expectancy. Across states, religious engagement predicts *shorter* life expectancy

(Figure 8; life expectancy data from SSRC, 2009). But across individuals, as we've previously

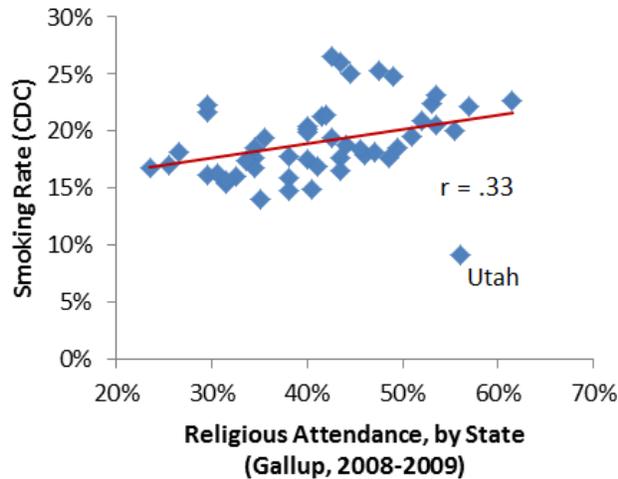


Life Expectancy at Age 20, by Worship Attendance
(21,204 Americans in National Health Interview Survey)

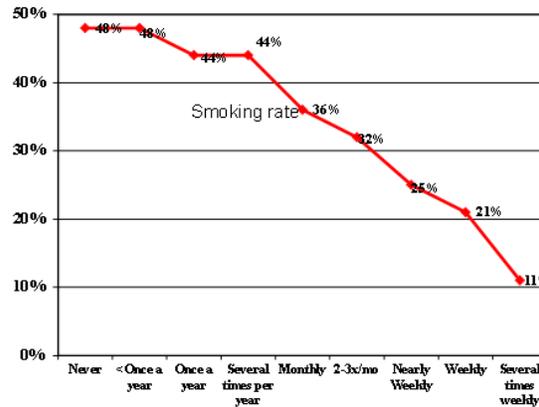


noted, epidemiological studies reveal that religious engagement predicted *longer* life expectancy (Figure 9; meta-analytic data from Hummer et al., 1999).

Smoking. Life expectancy differences are influenced by smoking rates, which are somewhat greater in most religiously engaged states, but lower among the most religiously engaged individuals (Figures 10 and 11).

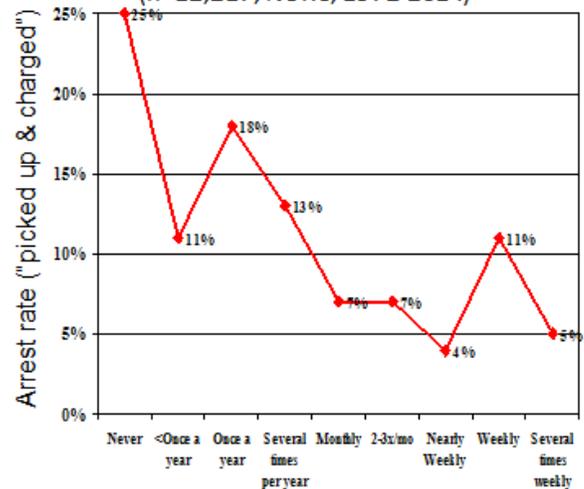


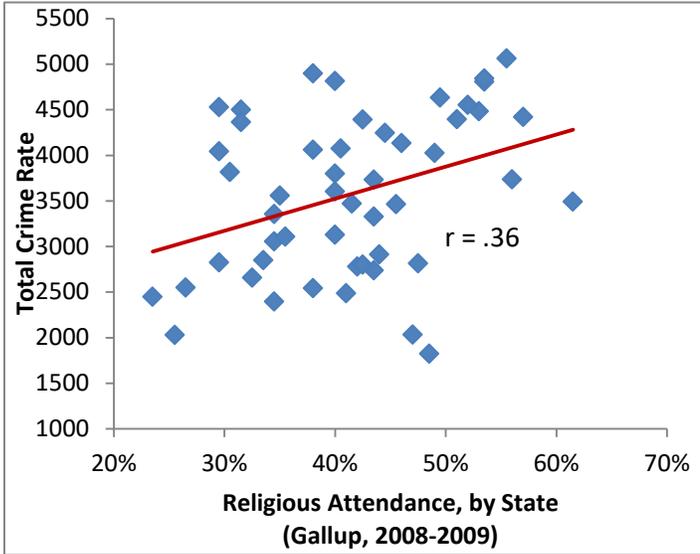
Religious Attendance and Smoking Rate
(n=16,276, General Social Survey, 1972-2008)



Crime. Across states, religious engagement predicts higher crime rates (Figure 12, from the FBI Uniform Crime Report of property + violent crime). But across individuals, it predicts lower crime rates (Figure 13, from tinyurl.com/generalsocialsurvey).

Religious Attendance and Arrest Rate
(n=12,217, NORC, 1972-2014)

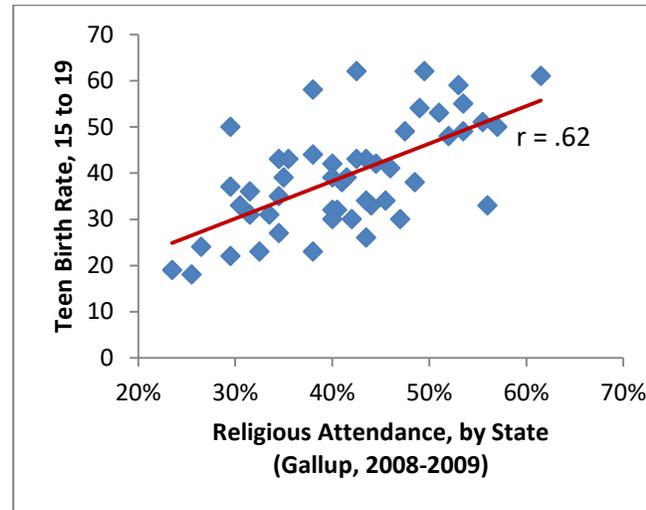
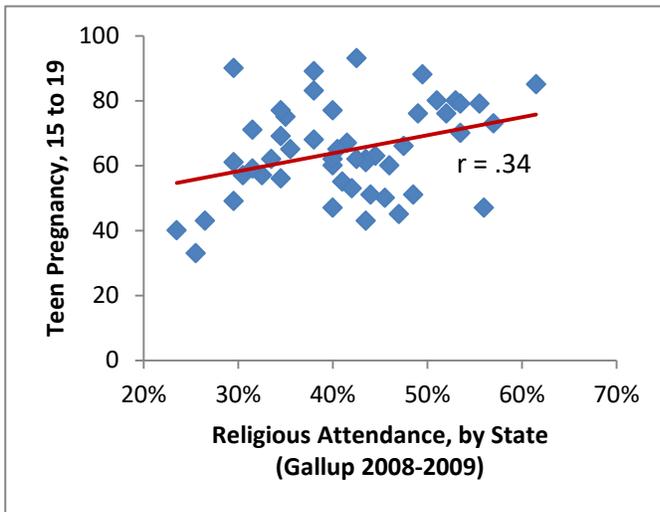




Teen pregnancy and birth rates.

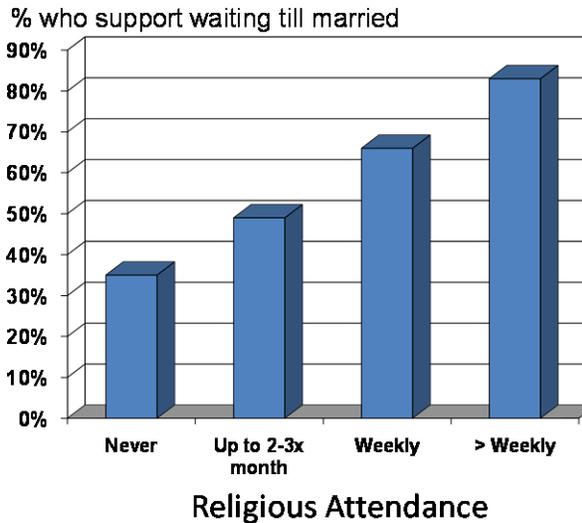
Across states, religious engagement predicts higher teen pregnancy and birth rates (Figures 14 and 15, data from Henshaw & Carlin, 2010). Using an 8-item measure of adult religious belief and practice from the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscapes

Survey, another research team found a stronger .73 correlation between state level religiosity and teen (ages 15 to 19) birth rates (Straythorn & Strayhor, 2009).

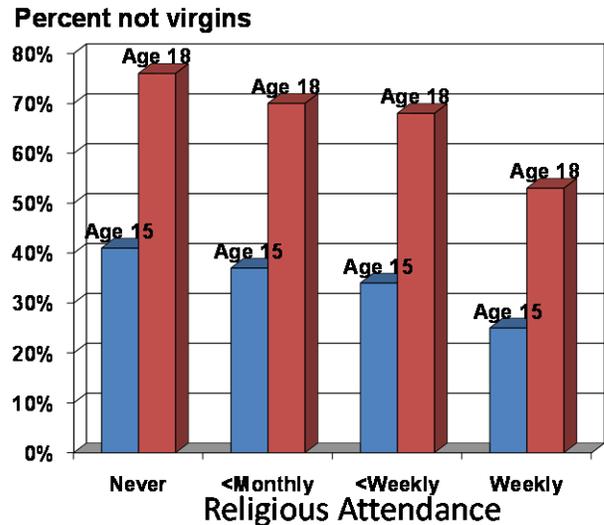


Across *individual* teens, however, religious engagement predicts more support for “waiting till married,” less sexual activity, and modestly *fewer* teen births (Figures 16, 17, and 18). These data come from the National Survey on Youth and Religion (a survey of nationally representative sample of 13- to 17-year-olds [Regnerus, 2008]) and the National Longitudinal

National Survey of Youth and Religion



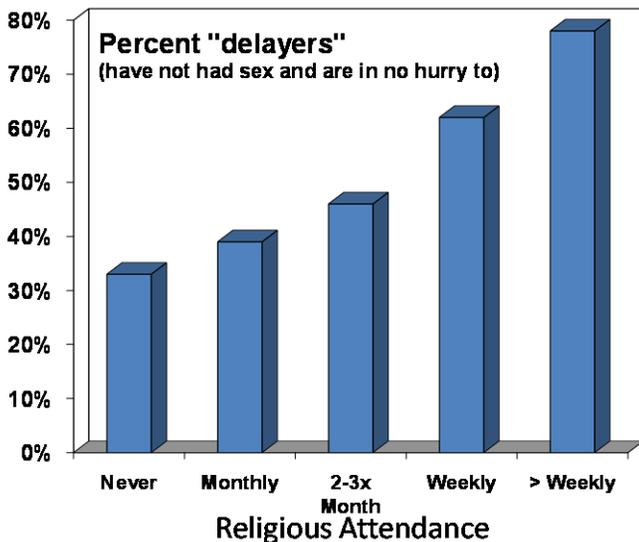
National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health



Study of Adolescent Health (Nonnemaker,

McNeely, & Blum, 2003). The latter study also found that among sexually active teens, religious engagement was not a predictor of birth control use. If religiously engaged teens are a) more sexually restrained, and b) equally likely to use birth control when sexually active, then they should have somewhat fewer pregnancies. Indeed, religiously engaged teens have a slightly reduced risk of “ever being pregnant” (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health: $r = -.22$) and of premarital pregnancy (a new meta-analytic review of 87 studies of adolescent religiosity and sexuality: $r = -.16$ [Lucero, Kusner, Speace, & O’Brien, 2008]).

National Survey of Youth and Religion



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Reflections on the Religious Engagement Paradox

So we are presented with strikingly paradoxical results. Various measures

reveal a positive association between religious engagement and human flourishing across individuals, and a negative association across aggregate places. If you were to be plucked from where you live now and dropped into another country or state, and if you want your new place to embody the good life—the healthy, happy, crime free life—then hope for a secular place. Pray that it will be secular Denmark rather than religious Pakistan, or secular Vermont rather than religious Mississippi. Yet survey data from many countries (though especially the more religious countries) reveal that actively religious individuals are happier, live longer, smoke less, commit less crime, have lower risk of teen pregnancy, and so forth. For religion’s apologists and critics there is a practical lesson here: If you want to make religion look good, cite individual data. If you want to make it look bad, cite aggregate data.

Angus Deaton and Arthur Stone (2013) have been independently struck by these paradoxical findings: “Why might there be this sharp contradiction between religious people being happy and healthy, and religious places being anything but?”

And consider this: Similarly stunning individual versus aggregate paradoxes appear in other realms as well. As Ed Diener and I explain (Myers & Diener, 2018), these realms include:

- *Politics.* Low-income states and high-income individuals have voted Republican in recent U.S. presidential elections (tinyurl.com/PoliticalParadox). (What do you

think: Which data—state or individual level—tell the truest story about whether rich people are more or less likely to vote Republican?)

- *Happy welfare states and unhappy liberals.* Liberal countries and conservative individuals express greater well-being (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Holmes, & Avery, 2014).
- *Google sex searches.* Highly religious states, and less religious individuals, do more Google “sex” searching (MacInnis & Hodson, 2015, 2016; Rasmussen & Bierman, 2016).
- *Meaning in life.* Self-reported meaning in life is greatest in poor countries and among rich individuals (Oishi & Diener, 2014; King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016).

Sociologist W. S. Robinson (1950) long ago appreciated that “An ecological correlation is almost certainly not equal to its individual correlation.” But that leaves us wondering *why* religiosity correlates negatively with the good life across countries and positively across individuals. Surely there are some complicating factors.

Consider marriage, for example. Religiously active people are more likely to be married. And married people are happier and healthier. So is religion merely a proxy for the “real” marriage factor? (Or should we say that religion’s encouragement of marriage is one of the social support mechanisms that mediates its effect?) Possibly. Earlier, I noted that the religiosity-longevity association occurs both with women and with men (and so is not just a tendency for women, who are more religious, to outlive men). Similarly, the religiosity-happiness association exists both among married and unmarried people.

Or we might wonder if the religiosity-happiness association is mediated by income—which has some association with happiness. But though richer people are happier than poor people, religiously engaged individuals tend to have *lower* incomes—despite which, they express greater happiness.

Income does, however, affect the aggregate comparisons. Comparisons of less versus more religious places are also comparisons of more *affluent* places (such as Denmark and Vermont) versus less affluent places (Pakistan and Mississippi). And as Ed Diener, Louis Tay, & I (2011) observed from Gallup World Poll data, controlling for objective life circumstances, such as income, eliminates or even slightly reverses the negative religiosity-well-being correlation across countries.

With these preliminary observations, I leave the full unravelling of the religious engagement paradox to others from higher statistical pay grades. There is surely more sleuthing to come. In the meantime, when reporting and interpreting data on predictors of the good life be aware: Conclusions drawn from aggregate data—comparing nations and states—may or may not tell us anything about the good life where it is lived—at the level of the individual.

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