

Effects of Religious Practice on Society

Considerable research has emerged over the past five decades that demonstrates the benefits of religious practice for society. Religious practice promotes the well-being of [individuals](#), [families](#), and the community.

Regular attendance at religious services is linked to healthy, stable [family life](#), strong [marriages](#), and well-behaved children. Religious worship also leads to a reduction in the incidence of domestic abuse, [crime](#), [substance abuse](#), and addiction. In addition, religious practice can increase [physical and mental health](#), longevity, and [education attainment](#). These effects are intergenerational, as grandparents and parents pass on the benefits to the next generations.

George Washington articulated the indispensability of the freedom of religious practice in his farewell address to the nation:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness—these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked, Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.¹⁾

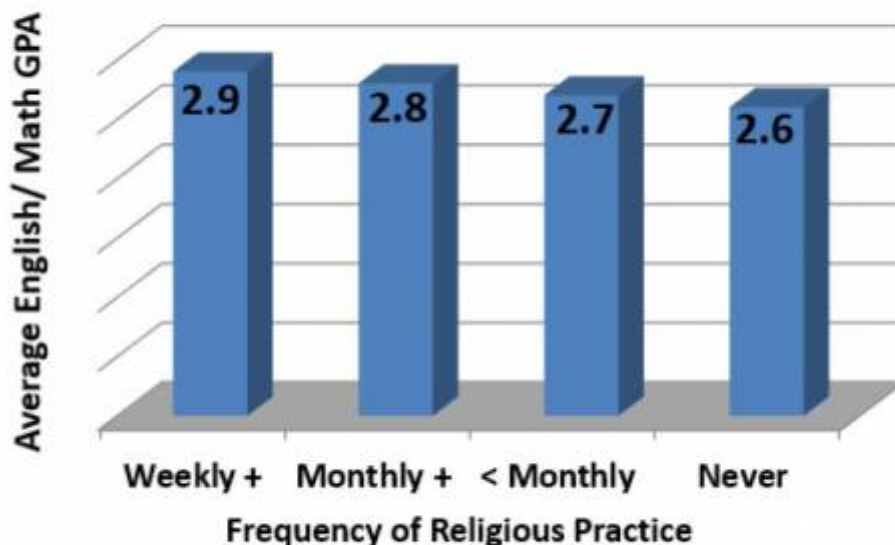
The practice of religion is a powerful antidote to many of our nation's pressing social ills, many of which have reached historically high proportions. Yet, despite the societal benefits of religion, the expression of faith in the public square has faced many challenges. Social science research indicates that permitting and accommodating free religious practice is necessary to move society in positive directions.

1. Education

(See [Effects of Religious Practice on Education](#))

Because education is important in so many ways for all citizens, any factor that promotes academic achievement is important to the common good. Academic expectations, level of education attained, school attendance, and academic performance are all positively affected by religious practice.²⁾ In two literature reviews conducted by Mark Regnerus of the University of Texas at Austin, educational attainment aspirations³⁾ and math and reading scores⁴⁾ correlated positively with more frequent religious practice. The below graph, based on analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, gives a picture of GPA scores across the U.S. for adolescents in grades 7-12.⁵⁾

Average GPA in English and Math (Combined) By Religious Practice



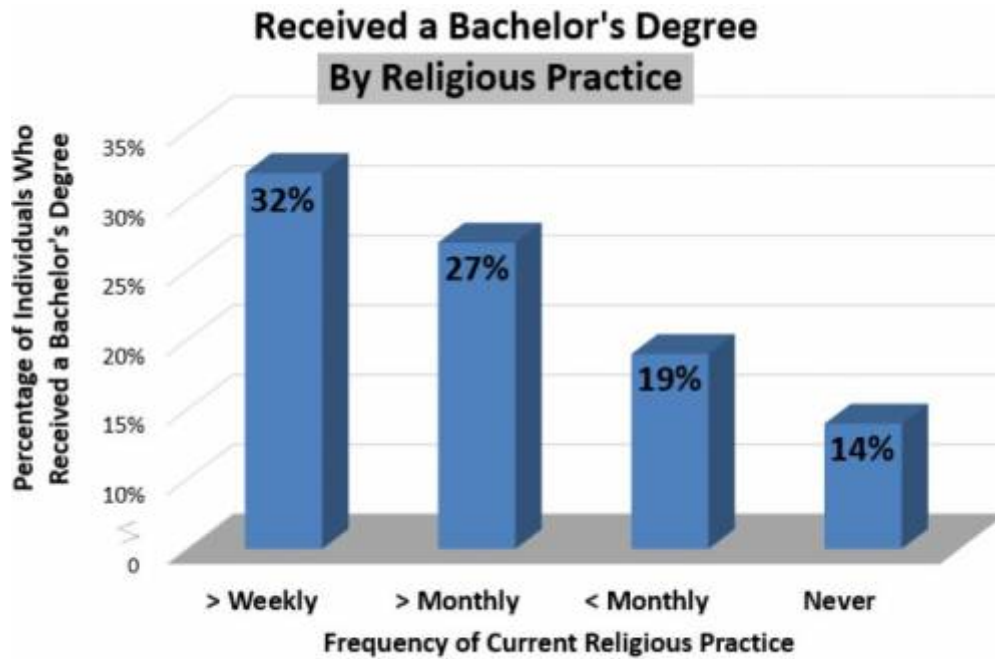
Source: Patrick Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson, and Jonathan Butcher, *A Portrait of Family and Religion in America*, The Heritage Foundation, 2006, chart 20, based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

Parents' religious practice also affects their children's educational outcomes. The greater the parents' religious involvement, the more likely they will have higher educational expectations for their children, and the more likely they will communicate with their children about schooling.⁶⁾ Their children will be more likely to pursue advanced courses, spend more time on homework, establish friendships with academically oriented peers, avoid cutting classes, and successfully complete their degrees.⁷⁾ According to Dr. Patrick Fagan and Dr. Scott Talkington's analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, individuals who attended religious services frequently were more likely to graduate from high school⁸⁾ and to receive a Bachelor's degree.⁹⁾

Received a High School Degree By Religious Practice



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997)



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997)

Students in religiously affiliated schools tend to exhibit a higher level of academic achievement than their peers in secular schools, particularly in [low-income urban neighborhoods](#). For example, studies continue to find that inner-city students in public schools lag behind in educational achievement, compared with students in Catholic schools.¹⁰⁾

The cultural values of a religious community are also a significant pathway to academic success for adolescents. For example, to earn a high school diploma or take advanced math courses, children must plan for the future and structure their activities accordingly. Religious communities typically invest in forming an [ethic of such discipline](#) and persistence. A recent study confirms both this indirect contribution of religious community values and the direct influence of the students' own religious activities in promoting academic achievement.¹¹⁾

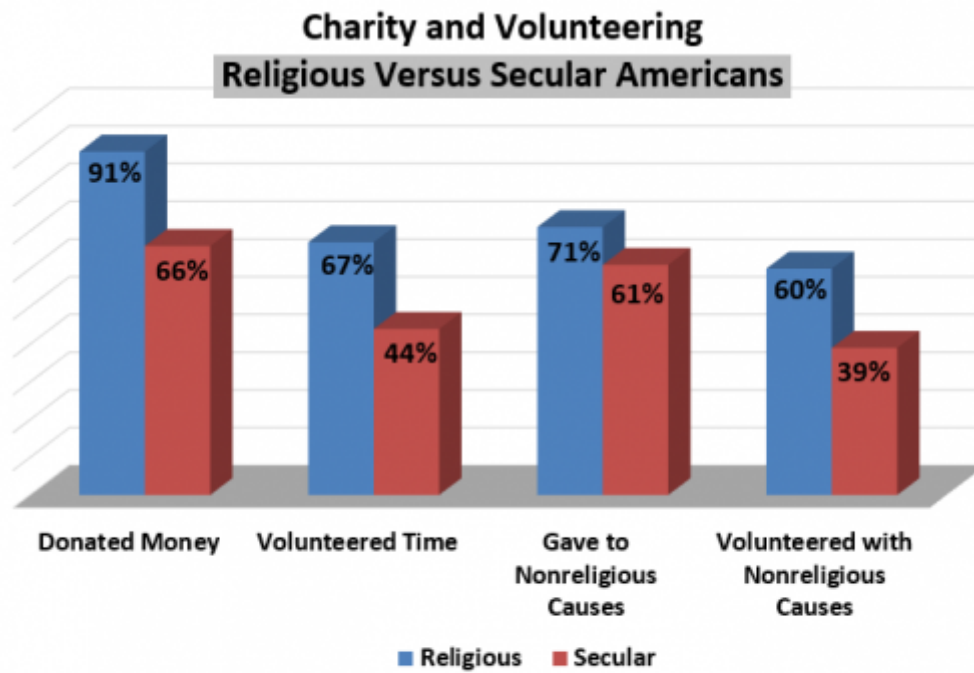
Earlier studies found this same relationship between religious practice and academic discipline. For example, in 1985, the groundbreaking work of Richard Freeman of Harvard University revealed that attendance at religious services and activities positively affected inner-city youth school attendance, work activity, and allocation of time—all of which were further linked to a decreased likelihood of engaging in deviant activities.¹²⁾ Youth who frequently attended religious services were five times less likely to skip school, compared with peers who seldom or never attended.¹³⁾

2. Economy

2.1 Charity

(See [Effects of Religious Practice on Charity](#))

Religious practice is linked to greater generosity in charitable giving and volunteering. In extensive research documenting the relationship between religion and philanthropy, Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute found that religious people were 25 percent more likely than their secular counterparts to donate money and 23 percent more likely to volunteer time. Even when it came to nonreligious causes, religious people were more generous.¹⁴⁾



Source: Arthur C. Brooks, "Religious Faith and Charitable Giving," *Policy Review* 121 (2003): 39.

* "Religious" people reported attending religious services weekly or more; "Secular" people reported attending religious services less than a few times per year.

Brooks also demonstrated that religious practice correlates with a higher rate of care and concern for others. Compared with peers with no religious affiliation, religious respondents were 15 percent more likely to report having tender, concerned feelings for the disadvantaged. This gap was reduced by only 2 percent when the effects of education, income, marital status, sex, race, and age were taken into account.¹⁵⁾

2.2 Social Mobility

(See [Effects of Religious Practice on Poor Communities](#))

For youth in impoverished neighborhoods, religious attendance made the greatest difference in [academic achievement](#) prospects, according to research in 2001 by Mark Regnerus. As rates of unemployment, poverty, and female-headed households grew in a neighborhood, the impact of a student's level of religious practice on academic progress became even stronger.¹⁶⁾

Regnerus goes on to suggest that religious affiliation had a positive impact on educational attainment for African-Americans residing in a high-risk neighborhood, even when controlling for family structure, although its effect was strongest for youth living in two-parent families.¹⁷⁾ The role of religion in [building relationships](#) and [habits of hard work](#) "reinforces a conventional (as opposed to alternate or illegal) orientation to success and achievement." Youth religious affiliation in combination with religious families and friends serves to integrate youth into the broader society and shapes their aspirations for education and achievement.¹⁸⁾

3. Crime

(See [Effects of Religious Practice on Crime Rates](#) and [Effects of Religious Practice on Substance](#))

Abuse)

Religious attendance is associated with direct decreases in both minor and major forms of crime and deviance, to an extent unrivalled by government welfare programs.¹⁹⁾ There is a 57 percent decrease in likelihood to deal drugs and a 39 percent decrease in likelihood to commit a crime among the young, black inner city population if they attend religious services regularly.²⁰⁾ Decades of research also indicate that a higher level of religious involvement is associated with a reduced likelihood of abusing alcohol²¹⁾ or drugs.²²⁾

4. Health

(See [Effects of Religious Practice on Health](#))

In a 2002 systematic review of the academic literature on the effects of religion, the majority of research revealed that religious commitment and practice can lead to increased self-esteem and well-being.²³⁾ Religious practice is also related to greater longevity,²⁴⁾ and a reduced risk of a number of health complications like colitis or different forms of cancer.²⁵⁾

5. Family Relationships

(See [Effects of Religious Practice on Family Relationships](#))

The practice of religion not only stabilizes [marriage](#), but also improves its quality. Brad Wilcox of the University of Virginia found that the more frequently husbands attended religious services, the happier their wives said they were with the level of affection and understanding that they received and the amount of time that their husbands spent with them.²⁶⁾ Similarly, religious participation tends to foster an authoritative, warm, active, and expressive style of parenting. Parents who attend religious services are more likely to enjoy a better relationship with their children²⁷⁾ and are more likely to be involved with their [children's education](#).²⁸⁾ Moreover, the greater a child's religious involvement, the more likely both the child and parent will agree about the quality of their relationship,²⁹⁾ the more similar their values will be, and the greater their emotional closeness will be.³⁰⁾ However, some of the same research also shows that religious differences within families can detract from the parent-child relationship.

¹⁾ James D. Richardson, *Compilation of Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1907), Vol. 1, p. 213.

²⁾ , ⁶⁾ Jennifer L. Glanville, David Sikkink, and Edwin I. Hernandez, "Religious Involvement and Educational Outcomes: The Role of Social Capital and Extracurricular Participation," *The Sociological Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2008): 105-137.

³⁾ , ¹⁶⁾ Mark D. Regnerus, "Making the Grade: The Influence of Religion upon the Academic Performance of Youth in Disadvantaged Communities," University of Pennsylvania, Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society Report No.3, 2001.

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⁵⁾ Patrick Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson, and Jonathan Butcher, *A Portrait of Family and Religion in America*, The Heritage Foundation, 2006.

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- ¹⁰⁾ Derek Neal, "What Have We Learned About the Benefits of Private Schooling?" Federal Reserve Bank of New York *Economic Policy Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1998), pp. 79-86.
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- ¹³⁾ Douglas M. Sloane and Raymond H. Potvin, "Religion and Delinquency: Cutting Through the Maze," *Social Forces*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (September 1986), pp. 87-105.
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- ²²⁾ Deborah Hasin, Jean Endicott, and Collins Lewis, "Alcohol and Drug Abuse in Patients with Affective Syndrome," *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 26, no. 3 (May-June 1985): 283-295.
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- ²⁵⁾ Jeffrey S. Levin and Preston L. Schiller, "Is There a Religious Factor in Health?" *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (March 1987), pp. 9-35.
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- ²⁹⁾ William S. Aquilino, "Two Views of One Relationship: Comparing Parents' and Young Adult Children's Reports of the Quality of Intergenerational Relations," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (November 1999), pp. 858-870.
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This entry draws heavily from [95 Social Science Reasons for Religious Worship and Practice](#) and [Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability](#).

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