

Effects of Religious Practice on Marriage

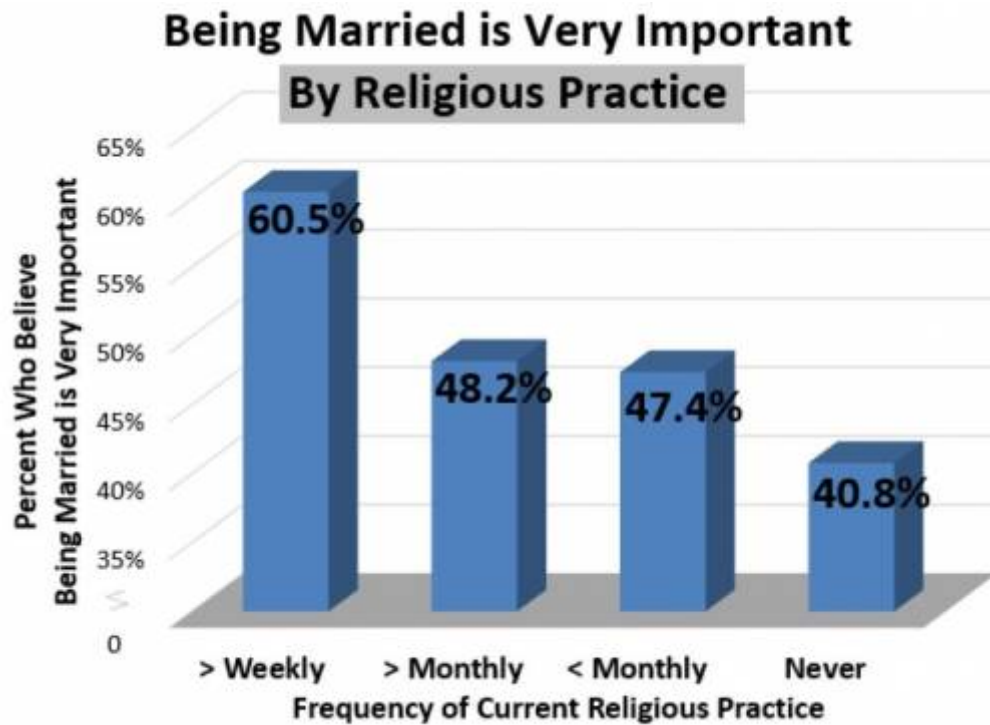
There are many indications that the combination of [religious practice](#) and stable marital relationships contributes to a strong and successful next generation. Social science shows that stable marriage is associated with improved [physical](#), [intellectual](#), [mental](#), and emotional health of men, women, and children, and equips them with the [values and habits](#) that promote prosperous economic activity.¹⁾ Religious practice is also related to positive outcomes for the stability and quality of marriage.

1. Marriage

Numerous sociological studies have shown that valuing religion and regularly practicing it are associated with greater marital stability, higher levels of marital satisfaction, and an increased inclination to marry.²⁾ Religious attendance is the most important predictor of marital stability,³⁾ confirming even studies conducted over 50 years ago.⁴⁾ Furthermore, couples who acknowledged a divine purpose in their marriage were more likely to collaborate, to have greater marital adjustment, and to perceive more [benefits from marriage](#).⁵⁾ These same couples also said that they were less likely to use aggression or to come to a stalemate in their disagreements.⁶⁾ Couples whose marriages lasted 30 years or more reported that their faith helped them to deal with difficult times, was a source of moral guidance in making decisions and dealing with conflict, and encouraged them to maintain their commitment to their marriages.⁷⁾ The more frequently husbands attended religious services, the happier their wives said they were with the level of affection and understanding they received and the amount of time their husbands spent with them.⁸⁾ Sixty percent who attended religious services at least monthly perceived their marriages as “very satisfactory,” compared with 43 percent of those who attended religious services less often.⁹⁾

1.1 Related American Demographics

Adults who attend religious services at least weekly are more likely to report that being married is personally very important to them than those who worship less frequently. According to the General Social Survey (GSS), 60.5 percent of adults who worship at least weekly report that being married is either very important to them or one of the most important values they hold, followed by 48.2 percent of those who worship between one and three times a month, 47.4 percent of those who attend religious services less than once a month, and 40.8 percent of those who never attend religious services.¹⁰⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



Source: General Social Surveys, 1972-2006

2. Divorce

The sociological literature reviews by the late David Larson of the Duke University Medical School and his colleagues indicated that religious attendance is the most important predictor of marital stability.¹¹⁾ Marriages in which both spouses attend religious services frequently are 2.4 times less likely to end in divorce than marriages in which neither spouse worships.¹²⁾ Those who consider their religious beliefs “very important” are 22 percent less likely to divorce than those to whom religious beliefs are only “somewhat important.”¹³⁾ Women who are more religious are less likely to experience divorce or separation than are their less religious peers.¹⁴⁾

During the 1980s and 1990s, when religious practice decreased overall,¹⁵⁾ the association between regular religious attendance and marital stability became even more apparent. Those who had ceased religious practice divorced 2.5 times more frequently than those who continued to attend religious services.¹⁶⁾ Paul Amato, a leading authority on the sociology of divorce from Pennsylvania State University, concluded that a possible increase in religious practice among some already existing marriages might have offset the negative effects of the overall decrease in religious practice among many other Americans. The rise in religious practice in this newly worshipping sector between 1980 and 2000 brought about increased support for lifelong marriage and counterbalanced, at the national aggregate level, two other trends: the increased incidence of [premarital cohabitation](#) and the increased work hours of married women, both of which are associated with decreased marital satisfaction and a greater likelihood of divorce. Amato concluded that this increase in religious worship in one subgroup was one of the main factors in preventing growth in overall levels of marital unhappiness and proneness to divorce. As a result, the divorce rate in 2000 was nearly identical to the rate in 1980.¹⁷⁾

The likelihood of divorce is even further reduced when husbands and wives share the same religious commitment. Such couples report having a greater sense of well-being and more satisfaction with their marital relationship,¹⁸⁾ and they are less likely to commit acts of domestic violence.¹⁹⁾ A study of couples with divergent theological views showed that they were more likely to argue, especially about

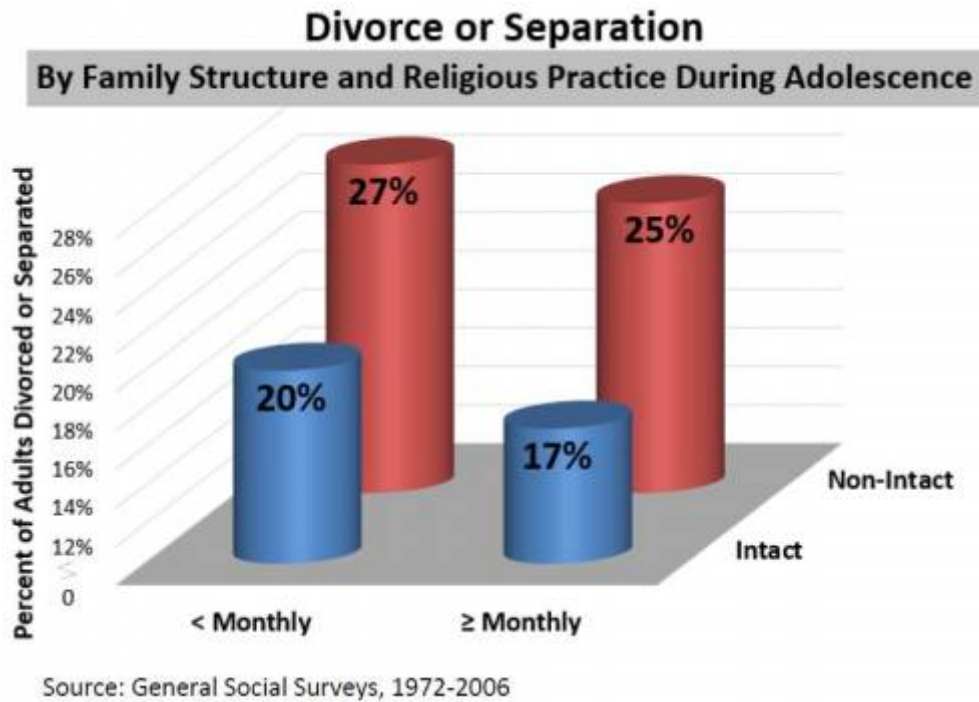
financial matters.²⁰⁾ Intermarriage across major faith groups is also linked with greater marital instability.²¹⁾ Furthermore, couples who share the same faith are more likely to reunite if they separate than are couples who do not share the same religious affiliation. In one study, one-third of the separated spouses who had the same religious affiliation reconciled, compared with less than one-fifth of those with different affiliations.²²⁾

2.1 Related American Demographics

According to the General Social Survey, adults who frequently attended religious services as adolescents were less likely to ever divorce or separate than those who did not attend religious services.²³⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



The same survey showed that those raised in an intact family were even less likely to be divorced or separated. Roughly 17 percent of adults who attended religious services at least monthly and lived in an intact family through adolescence had ever been divorced or separated, compared to 27 percent of those who attended religious services less than monthly and lived in a non-intact family as adolescents.²⁴⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



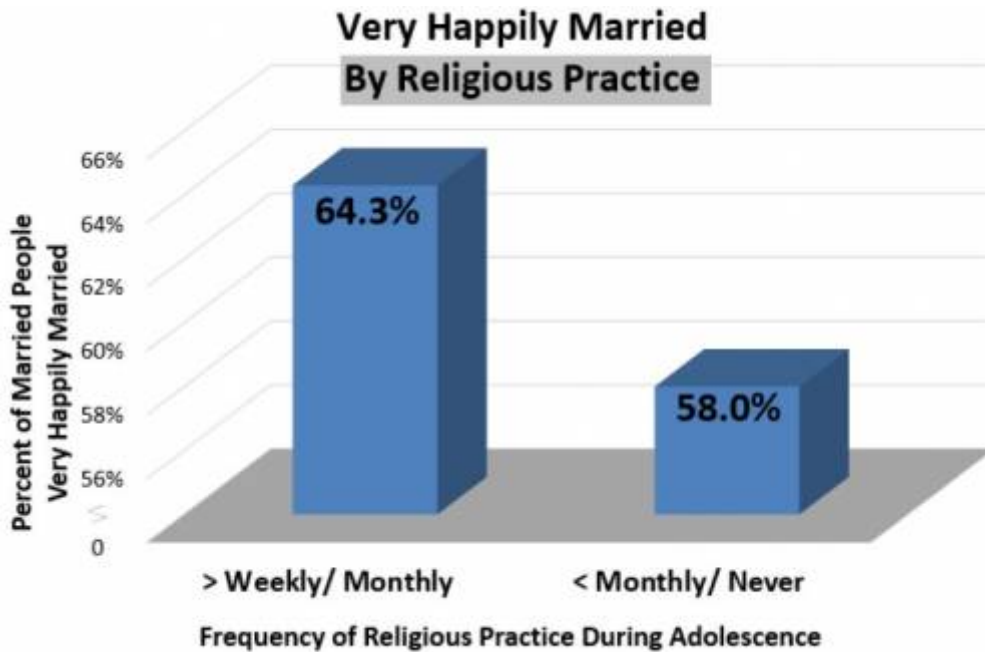
3. Marital Harmony and Satisfaction

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.²⁵⁾ Earlier research had shown that the more frequently couples engage in religious practice, the more they were satisfied with their marriages: 60 percent who attended religious services at least monthly perceived their marriages as “very satisfactory,” compared with only 43 percent of those who attended religious services less often.²⁶⁾

A 1977 study indicated a link between religious practice and marital sexuality: Very religious women had [greater satisfaction in sexual intercourse](#) with their husbands than did moderately religious or non-religious women.²⁷⁾

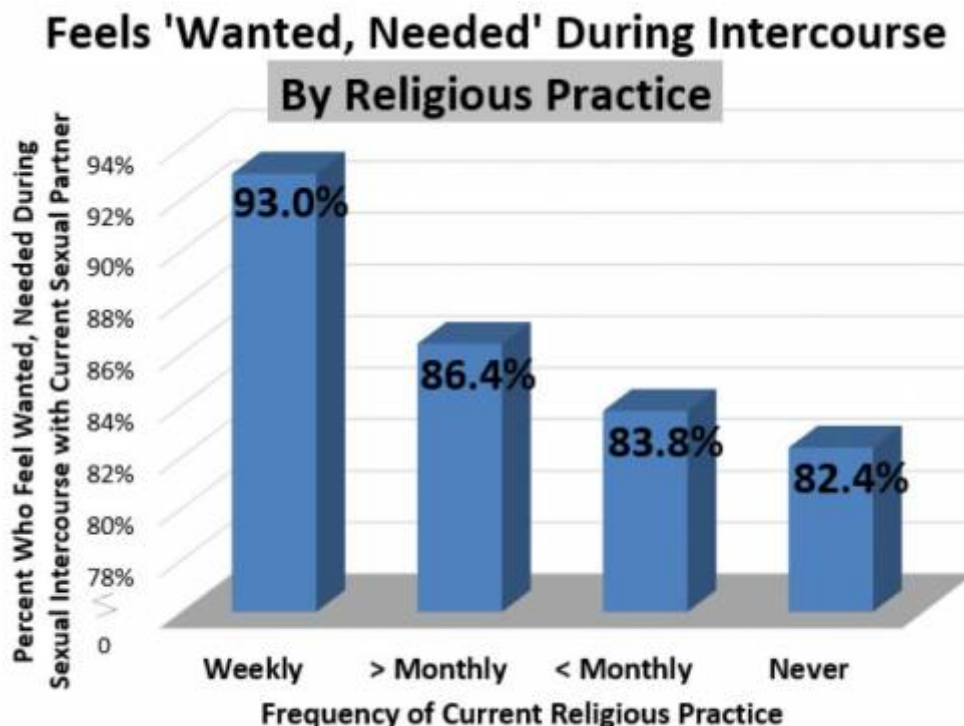
3.1 Related American Demographics

According to the General Social Survey, adults who frequently attended religious services as adolescents experienced higher levels of marital happiness.²⁸⁾ (See [Chart](#))



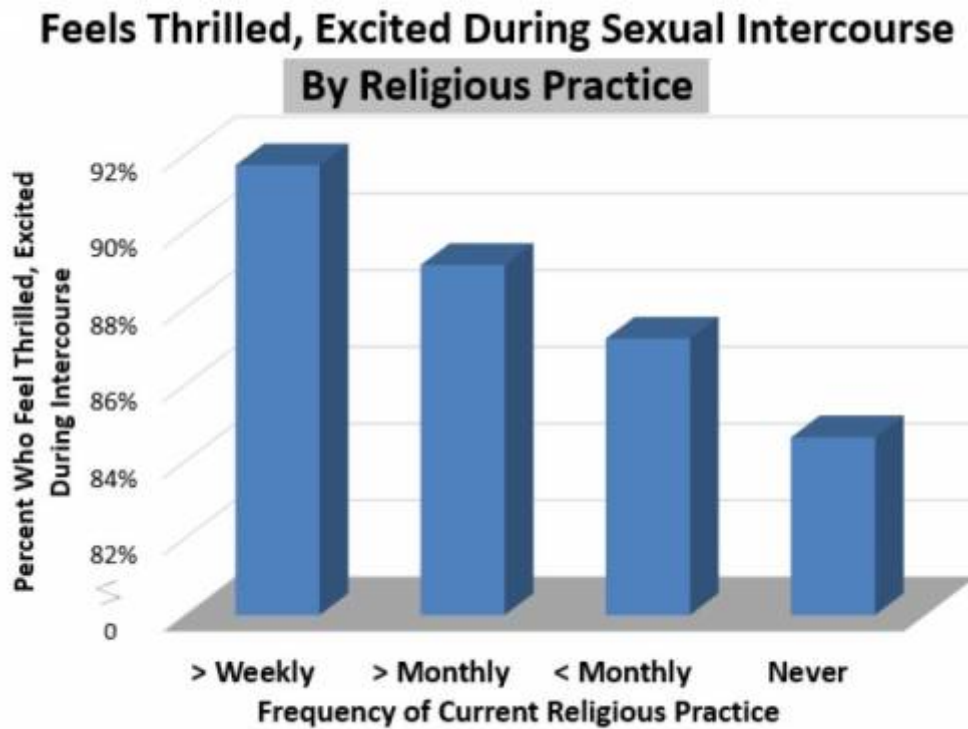
Source: General Social Survey, 1972-2006

The National Health and Social Life Survey showed that those who worshiped weekly were most likely to report feeling wanted and needed during intercourse with their current sexual partner (93 percent), followed by those who worshiped less than weekly but at least monthly (86.4 percent), those who worshiped less than monthly (83.8 percent), and those who never worshiped (82.4 percent).²⁹⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



Source: National Health and Social Life Survey, 1992

Similarly, those who worship weekly (91.7 percent) were most likely to report feeling thrilled and excited during intercourse with their current sexual partner, followed by those who worship less than weekly but at least monthly (89.1 percent), those who worship less than monthly (87.2 percent), and those who never worship (84.6 percent).³⁰⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



Source: National Health and Social Life Survey, 1992

¹⁾ See Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Free Press, 1960); and David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

²⁾ Andrew J. Weaver, Judith A. Samford, Virginia J. Morgan, David B. Larson, Harold G. Koenig, and Kevin J. Flannely, "A Systematic Review of Research on Religion in Six Primary Marriage and Family Journals: 1995-1999," *American Journal of Family Therapy* 30, no. 4 (July 2002): 293-309.

³⁾ David B. Larson, Susan S. Larson, and John Gartner, "Families, Relationships and Health," in *Behavior and Medicine*, ed. Danny Wedding (St. Louis: Mosby Year Book, Inc., 1990), 135-147.

⁴⁾ Lee G. Burchinal, "Marital Satisfaction and Religious Behavior," *American Sociological Review* 22, no. 3 (June 1957): 306-310.

⁵⁾ , ⁶⁾ Christopher G. Ellison and Kristin L. Anderson, "Religious Involvement and Domestic Violence Among U.S. Couples," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 2 (June 2001): 269-286.

⁷⁾ Linda C. Robinson, "Marital Strengths in Enduring Marriages," *Family Relations* 42, no. 1 (1993): 38-45.

⁸⁾ W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 186.

⁹⁾ Howard M. Bahr and Bruce A. Chadwick, "Religion and Family in Middleton, USA," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 47, (May 1985): 407-414.

¹⁰⁾ This chart draws on data collected by the General Social Survey, 1972-2006. From 1972 to 1993, the sample size averaged 1,500 each year. No GSS was conducted in 1979, 1981, or 1992. Since 1994, the GSS has been conducted only in even-numbered years and uses two samples per GSS that total approximately 3,000. In 2006, a third sample was added for a total sample size of 4,510. Patrick F. Fagan and Althea Nagai, "'The Personal Importance of Being Married' by Religious Attendance," Mapping America Project available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-82-84-176.pdf>

¹¹⁾ David B. Larson, Susan S. Larson, and John Gartner, "Families, Relationships and Health," in Danny Wedding, ed., *Behavior and Medicine* (St. Louis: Mosby Year Book, Inc., 1990), 135-147.

¹²⁾ Vaughn R.A. Call and Tim B. Heaton, "Religious Influence on Marital Stability," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 3 (September 1997): 382-392.

¹³⁾ Chris Knoester and Alan Booth, "Barriers to Divorce: When Are They Effective? When Are They

Not?" *Journal of Family Issues* 27, no. 1 (January 2000): 78-99.

¹⁴ Karen Price Carver, "Female Employment and First Union Dissolution in Puerto Rico," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 55, no. 3 (1993) 686-698.

¹⁵ Michael Hout, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (April 2002): 165-190.

¹⁶ Timothy T. Clydesdale, "Family Behaviors Among Early U.S. Baby Boomers: Exploring the Effects of Religion and Income Change, 1965-1982," *Social Forces* 76, no. 2 (December 1997): 605-635.

¹⁷ Paul R. Amato, David R. Johnson, Alan Booth, and Stacy J. Rogers, "Continuity and Change in Marital Quality Between 1980 and 2000," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, no.1 (February 2003): 1-22.

¹⁸ Lisa D. Pearce and Dana L. Haynie, "Intergenerational Religious Dynamics and Adolescent Delinquency," *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (June 2004): 1553-1572.

¹⁹ Christopher G. Ellison, John P. Bartkowski, and Kristin L. Anderson, "Are There Religious Variations in Domestic Violence?" *Journal of Family Issues* 20, no. 1 (January 1999): 87-113.

²⁰ Kristen Taylor Curtis and Christopher G. Ellison, "Religious Heterogamy and Marital Conflict: Findings from the National Survey of Families and Households," *Journal of Family Issues* 23, no. 4 (May 2002): 551-576.

²¹ Evelyn L. Lehrer and Carmel U. Chiswick, "Religion as a Determinant of Marital Stability," *Demography* 30, no. 3 (August 1993): 385-404.

²² Howard Wineberg, "Marital Reconciliation in the United States: Which Couples Are Successful?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 56, no. 1 (February 1994): 80-88.

²³ This chart draws on data collected by the General Social Surveys, 1972-2006. From 1972 to 1993, the sample size averaged 1,500 each year. No GSS was conducted in 1979, 1981, or 1992. Since 1994, the GSS has been conducted only in even-numbered years and uses two samples per GSS that total approximately 3,000. In 2006, a third sample was added for a total sample size of 4,510.

Patrick F. Fagan and Althea Nagai, "Divorce or Separation: Religious Attendance in Adolescence," Mapping America Project. Available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-61-63-169.pdf>

²⁴ This chart draws on data collected by the General Social Surveys, 1972-2006. From 1972 to 1993, the sample size averaged 1,500 each year. No GSS was conducted in 1979, 1981, or 1992. Since 1994, the GSS has been conducted only in even-numbered years and uses two samples per GSS that total approximately 3,000. In 2006, a third sample was added for a total sample size of 4,510.

Patrick F. Fagan and Althea Nagai, "Divorce or Separation: Religious Attendance and Family Structure in Adolescence," Mapping America Project. Available at

<http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-61-63-169.pdf>

²⁵ W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 186.

²⁶ Howard M. Bahr and Bruce A. Chadwick, "Religion and Family in Middleton, USA," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 47, (May 1985): 407-414.

²⁷ Carol Tavris and Susan Sadd, *The Redbook Report on Female Sexuality* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1977).

²⁸ This chart draws on data collected by the General Social Survey, 1972-2006. From 1972 to 1993, the sample size averaged 1,500 each year. No GSS was conducted in 1979, 1981, or 1992. Since 1994, the GSS has been conducted only in even-numbered years and uses two samples per GSS that total approximately 3,000. In 2006, a third sample was added for a total sample size of 4,510.

Patrick F. Fagan and Althea Nagai, "Intergenerational Links to Marital Happiness: Religious Attendance," Mapping America Project. Available at

<http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-31-33-159.pdf>

²⁹ Patrick F. Fagan and Althea Nagai, "'Feels Wanted, Needed During Intercourse' with Current Sexual Partner by Marital Status and Religious Attendance," Mapping America Project. Available at

<http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-128.pdf>

³⁰ Patrick F. Fagan and Althea Nagai, "'Feels Thrilled, Excited During Intercourse with Current Sexual

Partner' by Marital Status and Religious Attendance," Mapping America Project. Available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-116.pdf>

This entry relies heavily on [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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