

RELIGION IN THE HOME

*Do Individuals and Couples Benefit
from Home-Based Religious Practices?*



THE
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Jason S. Carroll, Spencer L. James, and Hal Boyd

An International Report from
The Wheatley Institution

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Notes and Acknowledgements

The Wheatley Institution produces consequential scholarship in key topics consistent with its core mission of lifting society by preserving and strengthening core social institutions. Jason S. Carroll is a professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University and Associate Director of the Wheatley Institution. Spencer L. James is an associate professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University and is a Fellow of the Wheatley Institution and Director of the Global Families Research Initiative. Hal Boyd is an associate professor of family law and policy in Brigham Young University's School of Family Life and a fellow of the Wheatley Institution.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, congregations in the United States and around the world temporarily closed their doors. Religious believers were left to practice faith largely within their own homes. Some wondered: Is home-centered religious worship worth it? Do religious individuals and couples gain any benefits from everyday religious patterns that extend beyond brick-and-mortar houses of worship?

This report seeks to provide insight into these and other questions. Examining data from before the COVID-19 pandemic, the study compares four levels of religiosity - non-religious, nominally religious, regular church attenders, and regular home-worshippers - across 11 different countries: Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Columbia, France, Ireland, Mexico, Peru, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Different patterns of religious practice (family and personal prayer, religious conversations in the home, reading scriptures or holy writ, and attending church services) determined the four levels of religiosity.

The study compares the levels of religiosity with reported outcomes across groups, including personal happiness and life meaning, as well as couple outcomes such as relationship quality, emotional closeness, sexual satisfaction, and financial security, among others. The results indicate that those who worship at home experience a number of benefits.

- **There is a strong correlation between home-centered religious worship patterns and positive relationship outcomes.** Couples and individuals who report the highest levels of religiosity - engaging in home-centered religious practices - are significantly more likely to report positive outcomes on various measures of life happiness and relationship quality. For example, women in relationships where both partners worship at home relationships were twice as likely to report being emotionally close to their partner. Similar results were found with regard to reported sexual satisfaction, joint decision making, money problems, and partner virtues, among others.
- **Religious “dosage” matters.** Religious worship patterns correspond to a stratification of religiosity, and this study found important differences in self-reported outcomes between those who engage in the highest levels of religious worship and those who are secular, nominally religious, or who attend religious services but do not engage in home worship practices. For example, higher levels of sexual satisfaction were found for couples who shared home-centered religious worship patterns, but not for couples who shared church attendance alone. These and other findings suggest potential benefits to high religious dosage, including home-centered religious practices.

- **There is a minority of home worshipers and attenders in highly secular nations.** It's not surprising that France reports less religious activity than countries such as Colombia or Peru, but the marked difference between nations leads to minority status of the highly religious living within secular countries. In Colombia, for instance, those who regularly attend church outnumber secular residents nearly 6 to 1; in France, however, secular residents outnumber those who attend religious services 16 to 1. Thus, in the secular West, highly religious individuals and couples represent a very small minority of the population. These findings should prompt further study of how this minority status may affect the highly religious populations in these countries.
- **The United States has unique religious patterns.** Wealthier, more-developed nations tend to exhibit less religiosity. Of the nations studied, the United States is an exception. Although the United States still has a large secular population, it differs from its wealthy counterparts in the relatively high proportion of citizens who engage in regular religious worship patterns, including home-centered religious practice. In this regard, the United States appears more like Colombia or Peru than, say, Canada. This balance between the highly religious and the secular may also provide insight into certain cultural and political dynamics within the United States.

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INTRODUCTION

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many houses of worship temporarily closed their doors. Believers around the globe observed holidays such as Ramadan, Passover, Easter, Rosh Hashanah, and others without traditional in-person gatherings. This isn't to say that congregations haven't discovered new ways to stay connected. Drive-up confessionals, parking lot prayer groups, and online services have all become ways congregations make do.

Some strategies work better than others. As one Saturday Night Live skit playfully depicts, saying “amen” isn't quite as seamless on a group Zoom call as it is in person. But, even as churches struggle to carry on their faith-based work, some believers actually reported a surge in faith. According to a Pew Research Center survey, many of those who described themselves as “very religious” reported that their faith was strengthened during the pandemic, even as the vast majority of respondents said their congregations were not holding in-person gatherings amid social isolation measures.¹

Could it be that home-centered religious patterns help contribute to benefits for individuals and couples?

This report draws on an 11-country data set from before the pandemic to examine whether home-centered religious patterns correlate with better self-reported outcomes, including strengthening marital relationships.

The analysis suggests that women and men who worship at home are significantly more likely to report greater life meaning, happiness, and a sense of God's love in their lives. Furthermore, despite some public perceptions to the contrary, women in marriages where the couple worships at home are more likely to say they engage in joint decision making. And, even when controlling for income and numerous other factors, highly religious couples who worship at home report greater emotional closeness, sexual satisfaction, and overall relationship quality. These couples are also more likely to say their partner practices relational virtues such as forgiveness, kindness, and responsibility.

The study's findings underscore the need for finer distinctions in studies that compare outcomes across levels of religious involvement. Prior research tends to conflate church attendance and high religiosity. This analysis, however, shows how a dosage paradigm with regard to religious participation and worship may help explain differences in outcomes. Although church attendance still serves as a useful proxy for high religiosity, significant differences in reported outcomes between those who attend church and those who attend church and engage in home-centered worship patterns deserve greater attention.

In addition to the United States, this report examines results from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Columbia, France, Ireland, Mexico, Peru, and the United Kingdom. From a comparative perspective, the differences in religiosity between less-developed nations and their wealthier peers stand out. The wealthier the nation, the greater the secularity. The only outlier to this trend is the United States, which has a larger portion of highly religious individuals than Australia, Canada, France, and even Ireland or Argentina.

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/30/few-americans-say-their-house-of-worship-is-open-but-a-quarter-say-their-religious-faith-has-grown-amid-pandemic/>

Roughly a third of the United States is secular, but roughly the same proportion is actively participating in religious activities, a pattern not observed in other countries studied. What this means is that in the United States a majority of the population still likely has some appreciation for, or at least familiarity with, the religious worship patterns and values of highly religious people. However, in majority secular countries, highly religious individuals are an increasingly small minority. This study suggests further examination into the minority environment occupied by the home-centered worshipers in majority secular nations. Sociologists have identified acute effects of minority stress that can result when minority identities and majority values conflict. The report's findings should prompt further study into potential minority stress experienced among highly religious individuals who worship at home in majority secular nations, as well as potential minority stress among secular people in majority religious nations, such as Colombia or Peru.

These data represent added insight into the benefits associated with home-centered religious patterns for both individuals and couples. It comes at a time when fewer people around the world are able to enjoy the benefits of in-person worship due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The study also explores the current religious landscape from a global perspective, highlighting the unique composition of worship patterns in the United States as well as in other nations. The findings should catalyze future investigation into the minority status of those who worship at home in secular nations, even as the balanced distribution of believers and nonbelievers in the United States may provide insight into the nation's distinct cultural and political environments.



METHODS- LEVELS OF “RELIGIOUS DOSAGE”

Findings in this report are based on the 2018 Global Faith and Families Survey (GFFS2018), which sampled adults between the ages of 18 and 50 over a two-week period in September 2018. Ipsos Public Affairs (formerly GfK), a prominent social research firm, conducted the survey on behalf of the Wheatley Institution and the Institute for Family Studies. The survey comprised individuals from 11 countries, including Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Ireland, Mexico, Peru, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Data from all countries except the United States come from opt-in panels via Toluna, which is one of the largest and most diverse qualified online panels in the world. Participants were recruited in real time using a network of referral websites. In the United States, data were collected from the KnowledgePanel®, a nationally representative panel whose members were recruited using probability-based sampling; households were provided with access to the internet and computer hardware as necessary. GFFS2018 data are nationally representative of the United States population between the ages of 18 and 50. Data from the other 10 countries have been weighted to match the distributions of age, gender, income, education, and region of residence for the population 18–50. We refer to levels of statistical significance in our results to highlight effects of meaningful size throughout (when we say in the text that results are significant, we mean that they are statistically significant at $p < .05$). This is technically correct for the United States sample but only descriptive for the other countries, as data from non-probability samples can approximate but never replicate probability-based samples.

The survey was conducted in three languages, English, Spanish, and French, depending on country and respondent preference. The final sample size across all 11 countries was 16,474. Sample sizes in each country are found in Table 1 and vary between 620 individuals in Colombia and 2,420 each in Australia and Ireland. Following standard procedure for international comparative research, we weighted the results according to population (not sample) sizes, so our pooled regressions are most heavily influenced by the two most populous countries in the sample, the United States and Mexico. Our individual-level analyses include all 16,474 respondents in the sample, while couple-level analyses use the 10,465 respondents who were currently married or cohabiting. Of those respondents in couple relationships, 738 were identified as same-sex couples.

TABLE 1: Global Faith and Families Survey, Sample Sizes by Country

| | |
|----------------|-------|
| Argentina | 668 |
| Australia | 2,420 |
| Canada | 2,200 |
| Chile | 1,240 |
| Colombia | 620 |
| France | 1,215 |
| Ireland | 2,420 |
| Mexico | 677 |
| Peru | 645 |
| United Kingdom | 2,344 |
| United States | 2,025 |

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

The primary focus of this report is a measure of what we term “Home Worship.” This independent variable was created with the idea of religious dosage in mind. Dosage, in the medical field, refers to the amount of a remedy a patient is supposed to take. Because many people around the world view religion as helping them address challenges in their family lives and beyond, we created a variable using this analogy. Ranging from “Seculars” (those who engage in no religious behaviors or activities) to “Home Worshipers” (those who attend church weekly, pray individually and with their family, read scriptures, and engage in religious conversation in their home several times per week).

To measure this variable, we examined five specific religious behaviors and asked how frequently survey participants engage in them, ranging from never/seldom² to weekly or more. Specifically, we asked how often respondents:

1. **Attend religious services** (aside from weddings or funerals)
2. **Pray individually** (not counting religious services or meals)
3. **Pray as a family** (again, not counting religious services or meals)
4. **Talk about faith or religion in the home**
5. **Read scriptures**, including the Bible, the Koran, the Torah, the Vedas, the Sutra, or any other scripture, as applicable.

To ensure we could differentiate between highly religious individuals versus only somewhat or sometimes religious individuals, we categorized each variable in the following way:

0 = Never/seldom: This means the respondent never or seldom (less than once a year) engages in a particular religious activity.

1 = Some practice: This indicates that the respondent sometimes practices a particular religious activity.

2 = Regular practice: This indicates that the respondent regularly practices a particular religious activity, defined as weekly or more for church attendance, daily or more for personal prayer, and at least two to three times a week or more for family prayer, discussions about religion in the home, and reading scriptures.

We categorized respondents into four different groups, namely Seculars, Nominals, Attenders, and Home Worshipers, ranging from low to high religiosity. Figure 1 shows the distribution of religious activity for each of these groups by displaying the percentage of people in each category who regularly engage in each religious activity.

² We include “seldom” here because some nonreligious individuals may, for instance, find themselves respectfully bowing their heads during a group prayer, even if they would never pray on their own.

Group 1-Seculars: The first group, labeled “Seculars,” made up 31% of our international sample. These are non-religious individuals who not only never attend church, but also never read scriptures, engage in family prayer or religious conversations at home, or say personal prayers.

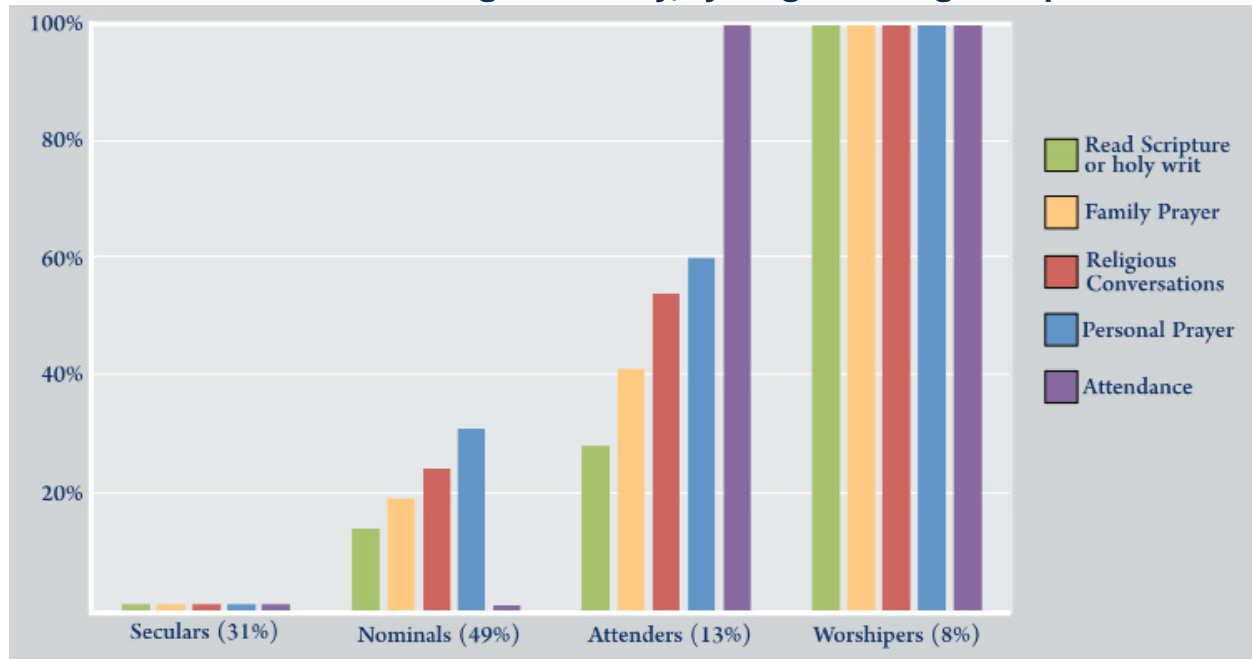
Group 2-Nominals: The second group, labeled “Nominals,” was the largest group and made up 49% of our international sample. These are respondents who report some amount of either personal or public religious participation, but do not regularly attend religious services.

Group 3-Attenders: The third group, labeled “Attenders,” made up 13% of our international sample. These individuals report that they attend church weekly. As noted in Figure 1, Attenders are both qualitatively and quantitatively different from their Nominal counterparts in that Attenders are nearly twice as likely as Nominals to read scriptures regularly, pray daily, and engage in regular family prayer and religious conversations in the home.

Group 4-Home-Worshippers: The final group is “Home Worshipers” and they made up 8% of our international sample. These respondents not only attend church at least weekly, but also pray on a daily basis and engage in the home worship practices of praying together as a family, reading scriptures, and having religious conversations in the home on a regular basis (at least two to three times a week).

Looking from left to right, Figure 1 displays the correlating effect of religious dosage. To the extent that regular religious worship translates into discernible benefits or disadvantages, such effects should be visible as we examine the groups, ranging from Seculars, who have no religious dosage, to Home Worshipers, who are highly religious and who might be expected to receive the benefit of any dosage that religiosity may provide.

FIGURE 1: The Distribution of Religious Activity, by Religious Dosage Group



CONTROL VARIABLES

All models control for a variety of plausible alternative explanations for the link between worship patterns and individual and couple outcomes. The analyses include controls for self-reported gender, age, education (high school; high school graduate; some tertiary education; completed baccalaureate degree or higher). We also controlled for whether a respondent was born in their respective country, whether the respondent lived with both biological/adopted parents at age 16, and whether the respondent had ever been divorced.

Additionally, we accounted for the legal status of the current union, whether married or cohabiting, whether the relationship was homosexual or heterosexual, relationship duration, the presence of children under 18 in the home, the financial circumstances of the household (unable to meet basic expenses; just meet basic expenses; live comfortably; live very comfortably), and the country of residence (approximating country fixed effects). We also accounted for whether the respondent lived in a rural or urban setting. This set of controls constitutes an extensive effort to account for alternative explanations for the observed relationships, suggesting that relationships that remain after controlling for these variables are likely robust.

We employ weighted binary logistic regression models with all controls in all models. Statistical significance is estimated by the p values ($p < .05$, two-tailed tests) from the binary logistic regression coefficients. Our figures show predicted probabilities from our regression models with control variables set at their means.



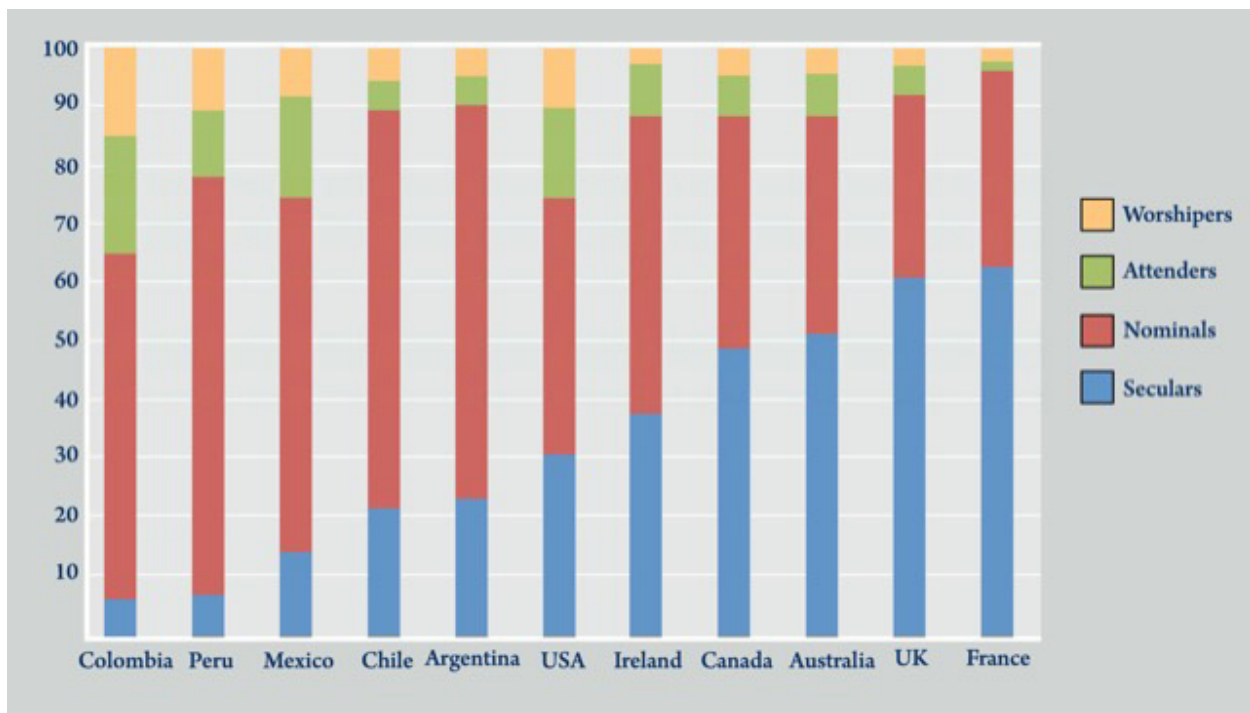
SECTION I - HOME WORSHIP PATTERNS ACROSS THE GLOBE

This report, based on data from 11 countries, is rooted in international comparative research, which challenges ethnocentric and nationalistic views by focusing on processes and phenomena that differ across countries, shedding light both on what countries share between them as well as where they differ. The aim of this approach is to compare and contrast nation-states and explore how institutions such as religion and family influence cultural practice, ultimately leading to a better understanding and awareness of people’s attitudes, behaviors, and ideologies in their native contexts. In turn, this leads to a deeper understanding of the individual and their place in society, both nationally and internationally.

Specifically, we’re interested in how religious dosage, or the extent to which an individual engages in regular religious practices, is linked to individual and relational well-being. From an international comparative perspective, then, we sought a broad range of individuals living in diverse societies. We selected some highly religious countries, such as Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, from South America, where religion still maintains an important foothold. We also chose to survey people in primarily secular countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, two European countries with a history of secularization.

Figure 2 shows the overall percentage of Seculars, Nominals, Attenders, and Home Worshipers across all 11 countries. Yet this masks significant variability across countries since some countries, such as France (63%) and the United Kingdom (61%), are majority Secular; whereas others, including Colombia (6%) and Peru (7%), are minority Secular. The religious worship patterns in each of the 11 countries is shown in Figure 2, ordered from left to right according to the percent of Seculars in that country.

FIGURE 2: Religious Worship Patterns Across the Globe



Two primary conclusions can be drawn from this graph. First, highly religious people can experience differences in degree and differences in kind when talking about the religious landscape of their country. For instance, a highly religious person in Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, and even in the United States can expect many if not most people in their country to have some perspective on what religious practice looks like and perhaps even some personal religious experiences. Even if not as devoutly religious as those we term Home Worshipers, most respondents in these nations are religious to some extent. The religious differences in these nations, then, largely vary by degree, not by kind.

In contrast, in majority Secular countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and France, highly religious people are far less common. In Australia, less than 1 in 8 people regularly attend religious services. In France, it's 1 in 25. In these countries, rather than being different from one's neighbors in degree, the reality of being highly religious runs counter to prevailing social norms. A highly religious respondent is far less likely to interact with religious neighbors, coworkers, and other acquaintances. In other words, being highly religious in a majority Secular country may be experienced not as a difference of degree, but rather of kind. Similarly, being a Secular in a majority religious country, such as Colombia or Peru, may also be an experiential difference of kind rather than of degree. In consequence, the experience of regularly attending church or engaging in practices such as daily prayer and frequently studying holy writ and scriptures may be quite different in a majority Secular country than in a majority religious country. We might therefore expect to find some differences in the influence of religion and secularity on outcomes depending on the relative religiosity of the country of residence.

HOME WORSHIP PATTERNS IN THE UNITED STATES

The second notable pattern we found is a unique religious worship pattern in the United States. From left to right, Figure 2 displays the percent of Seculars in a given country. The order of the chart also roughly correlates to the relative development of the country. Using the United Nations' 2019 Human Development Index (HDI), the percent of Seculars in each country correlates at .85 to the nation's respective HDI score, meaning that countries with higher HDI scores tend to have a more secular population - with the exception of the United States.

The United States has a high HDI score and it certainly has a large share of Seculars. But what appears to be different about the United States, in contrast with its wealthier and more developed counterparts, is just how religious the United States remains. When examining consistent religious activity, whether home worship patterns or regular church attendance, the United States looks akin to Colombia or Peru. In fact, the United States has a higher proportion of individuals in the two highest religious dosage groups than Mexico, Chile, or Argentina. And there's no country in the developed West that approaches the religious patterns found in the United States.

In Colombia, Attenders outnumber Seculars nearly 6 to 1; whereas in Canada, Seculars outnumber Home Worshipers 4 to 1. In France, it's 16 to 1 in favor of Seculars. But in the United States, the bar is nearly symmetrical between those who attend church weekly (26%; Attenders and Home Worshipers) and people who do not engage in religious behavior (31%; Seculars). In other words, the United States stands out, with nearly equal numbers of secular and religious individuals. If we project these numbers onto the general U.S. population of approximately 331 million (as-

suming that children generally follow the religious orientations of their parents, at least during childhood), this would mean that the United States has approximately 86 million actively religious individuals (both Attenders and Home Worshipers) and 103 million Seculars. To put that into perspective, the United States has more people attending church services regularly than the entire populations of either France (65 million) or the United Kingdom (68 million). This symmetry in religious polarization creates some patterns that make the United States unique among its international peers. This insight may also provide context for many of the deep cultural divisions that continue to define various social and political tensions in the United States.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This section has two key points. First, the frequency of home-based religious practices, such as reading scriptures or discussing religion with one's family, varies tremendously around the world. In some countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, Seculars vastly outnumber the highly religious. Religionists in these countries live in a context where regular religious practice is foreign to most. In contrast, frequent religious practice is far more common in other countries, such as Colombia, Peru, or Mexico. For highly religious people in this latter type of country, most people with whom they interact will not only understand religious practice, but also are likely to have personal experience with it. This difference in kind versus difference in degree is likely to be consequential in understanding how religion is connected to individual and relational well-being.



Second, the United States stands out. Only in the United States are Home Worshipers and Attenders roughly as numerous as Seculars, representing a distinctive religious backdrop for understanding current social divisions along political, economic, and social lines. For instance, both Seculars and active religious participants each represent approximately one third of the American population. Due to geographic differences in where these populations live (Seculars tend to live in large cities along the coasts and Home Worshipers

and Attenders often live in the South, Midwest, or Intermountain West), both Seculars and Home Worshipers/Attenders may feel like those around them live similar religious lives. It appears that the partisanship seen throughout the United States today can partly be explained by the religious lives of its citizens; political, economic, and social entrenchment experienced on many issues is unsurprising, even predictable. Increased levels of social harmony and connection will likely require balancing these differing groups in ways that acknowledge the need to live together in a religiously pluralistic culture.

SECTION II - RELIGION AND INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

In 2018, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released startling new statistics on the rise of deaths by suicide in the United States, which are up 25% since 1999 across most ethnic and age groups. Many experts have labeled this a crisis of mental health care, emphasizing that many people are not getting the services they need. While expanding mental health services is a laudable goal, others point out that the suicide rate has continued to increase even as more people have sought and received treatment and as services have become more widely available.

In an influential opinion piece in the *New York Times*, behavioral scientist Clay Routledge has proposed that modern trends in depression, anxiety, and suicide are also, in part, a “crisis of meaninglessness.” Drawing from a review of psychological science, he points to the changing landscape of modern life marked by “the decline in neighborliness, the shrinking of the family and the diminishing role of religion pose serious threats to a life of meaning.”³

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt⁴ has noted that all people grapple with the fundamental question—“What is the meaning of life?” He explains that when people yearn to understand the meaning of life, they are actually seeking answers to two interconnected questions: the question of the purpose of life and the question of the purpose within one’s own life. While the first question is concerned with the purpose of life generally, from an objective point of view, the second question focuses on life as experienced personally, from a subjective point of view. Therefore, the quest for personal purpose “within life” is concerned with the idea of a life well-lived, with questions such as: “How ought I to live? What should I do to have a good, happy, fulfilling, and meaningful life?”⁵

A core element of well-being is linked to the sensation of belonging to and serving something that is larger than self. Meaning helps individuals make sense of the world and understand their place within it. Notably, meaning can be found in a variety of life domains such as relationships, work, and religion. Research indicates that those who have a strong sense of meaning experience greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, positive emotion, and optimism, while those who do not experience meaning in life are more likely to report psychological distress⁶. Also, individuals who have higher levels of “sacred moments,” or experiences where they perceive they have encountered the sacred, have better levels of mental health.⁷ The current study suggests that religious dosage plays a role not only in people’s sense of life meaning, but also in their reported levels of happiness and whether they feel God’s love.

3 Routledge, C. (June 23, 2018). Suicides have increased. Is this an existential crisis?" *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/opinion/sunday/suicide-rate-existential-crisis.html>

4 Haidt, J. (2006). *The happiness hypothesis: Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom*. Basic Books.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 218

6 Steger, M. F. (2017). Meaning of life and wellbeing. In Slade, M., Oades, L. & Jarden, A. (Eds.), *Wellbeing, recovery and mental health.*, (pp. 75–85). Cambridge University Press.

7 Magyar-Russell, G., Pargament, K. I., Grubbs, J. B., Wilt, J. A., & Exline, J. J. (2020). The experience of sacred-moments and mental health benefits over time. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000394>

LIFE MEANING

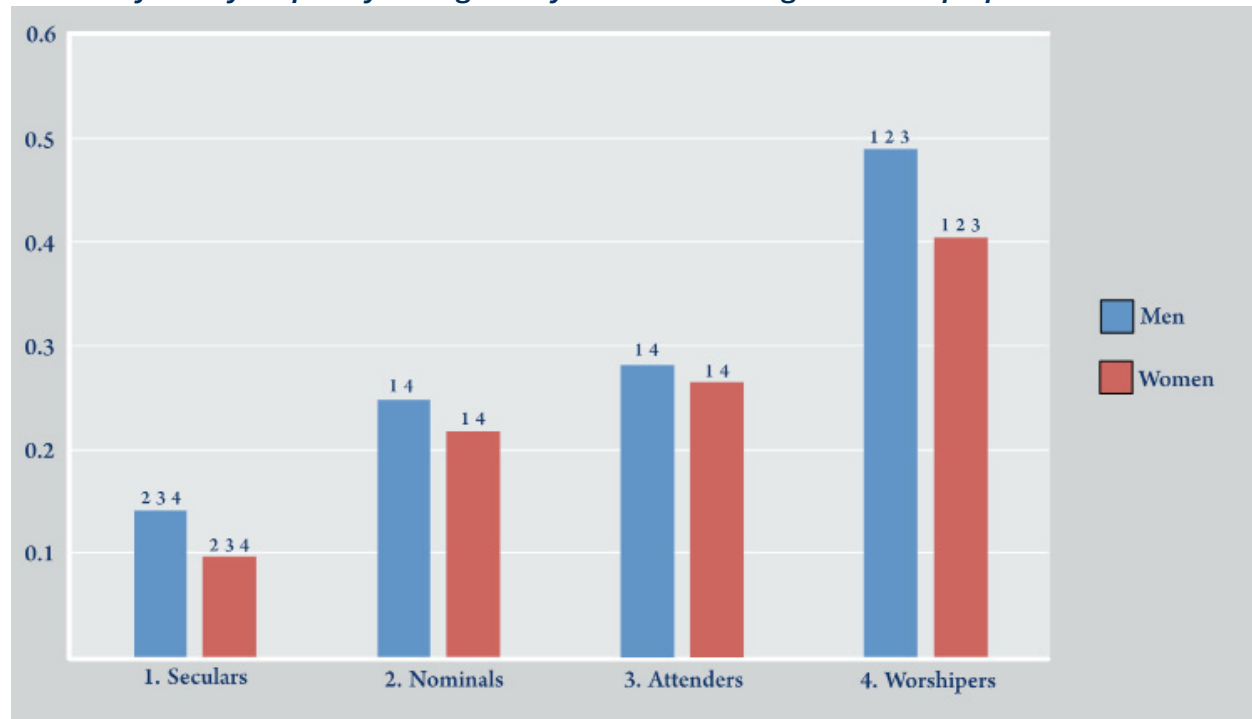
The focus of nearly all world religions is much more than a path to maximizing life's pleasures. In fact, most religious adherents attest that the spiritual dimension of life primarily represents a quest for meaning and purpose, even perhaps at the expense of short-term pleasures. This ties to the deeply human need to have value and to make a difference.

We asked respondents to report how often they feel that their "life is meaningful or has a purpose." We found that levels of religious involvement are associated with a greater sense of meaning and purpose for respondents in all 11 countries. The pattern for men and for women is similar when it comes to the influence of religion on life meaning. Specifically, Home Worshipers are much more likely to report high levels of life meaning than their Secular counterparts.

Of particular note, Home Worshipers are also significantly more likely than Attenders to report high levels of life meaning (see Figure 3). Thus, while these two groups are overtly similar in their regular weekly church attendance, there appears to be something particularly influential in the practice of Home Worship that taps faith's potential to endow life with an enduring sense of meaning. Additional research may look even further into whether the regular practice of personal worship patterns, such as personal prayer and scripture study, and family worship patterns, such as family prayer and home religious conversations, deepen the influence of faith in giving life a sense of purpose and meaning above and beyond church attendance alone.

FIGURE 3: Life Meaning

Probability of very frequently feeling that "your life is meaningful or has a purpose"

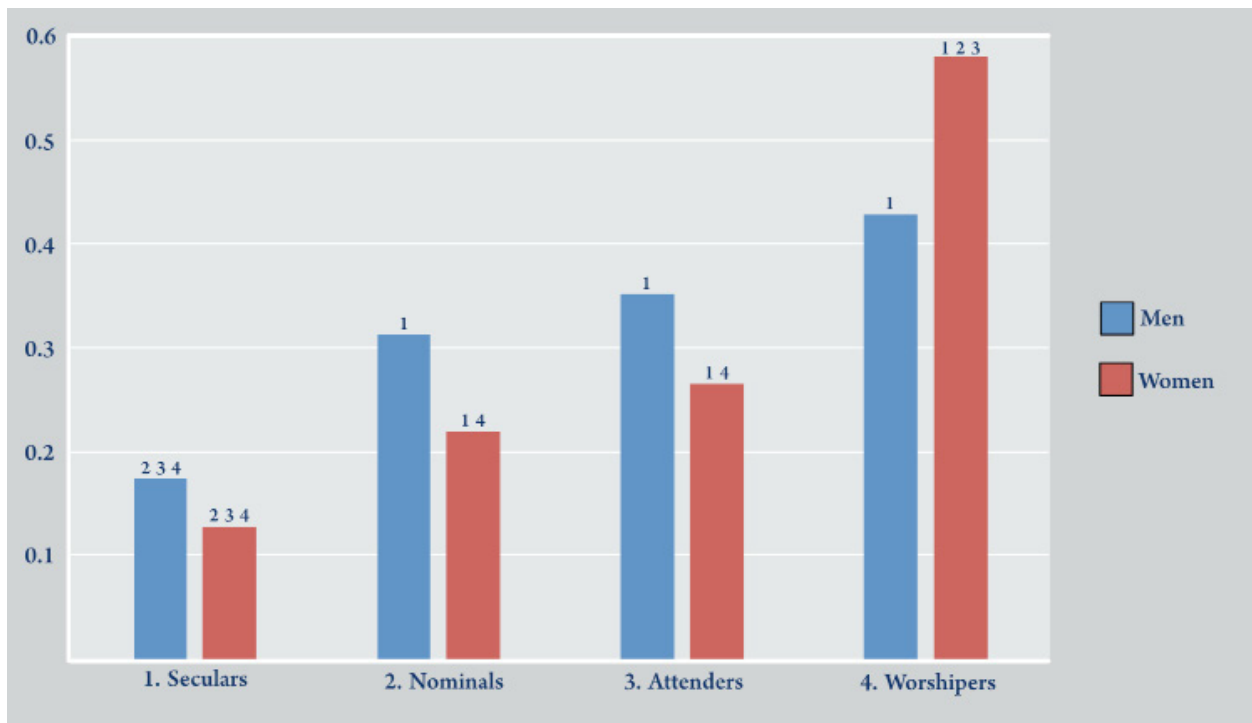


Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

In terms of magnitude, the association of religious involvement with life meaning is stronger for both women and men than is the association between religious involvement and happiness. Home Worshipers are nearly twice as likely than their less religious peers, and more than four times more likely than Seculars, to report a frequent sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

The United States displays a similar pattern with Home Worshipers reporting the highest levels of life meaning. However, we found that the pattern is more pronounced for women than for men (see Figure 4). In the United States, Home Worshiper women are more than twice as likely to have a frequent sense of life meaning than less religious women, and are nearly five times more likely to report a frequent sense of meaning than Secular women. For men, all three groups with religious involvement are similar to each other, but each reported a more frequent sense of life meaning than Seculars. When compared to men in the Seculars category, men of all levels of religious involvement are still about twice as likely to report a frequent sense of life meaning.

FIGURE 4: Life Meaning In The United States
Probability of very frequently feeling that "your life is meaningful or has a purpose"



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

LIFE HAPPINESS

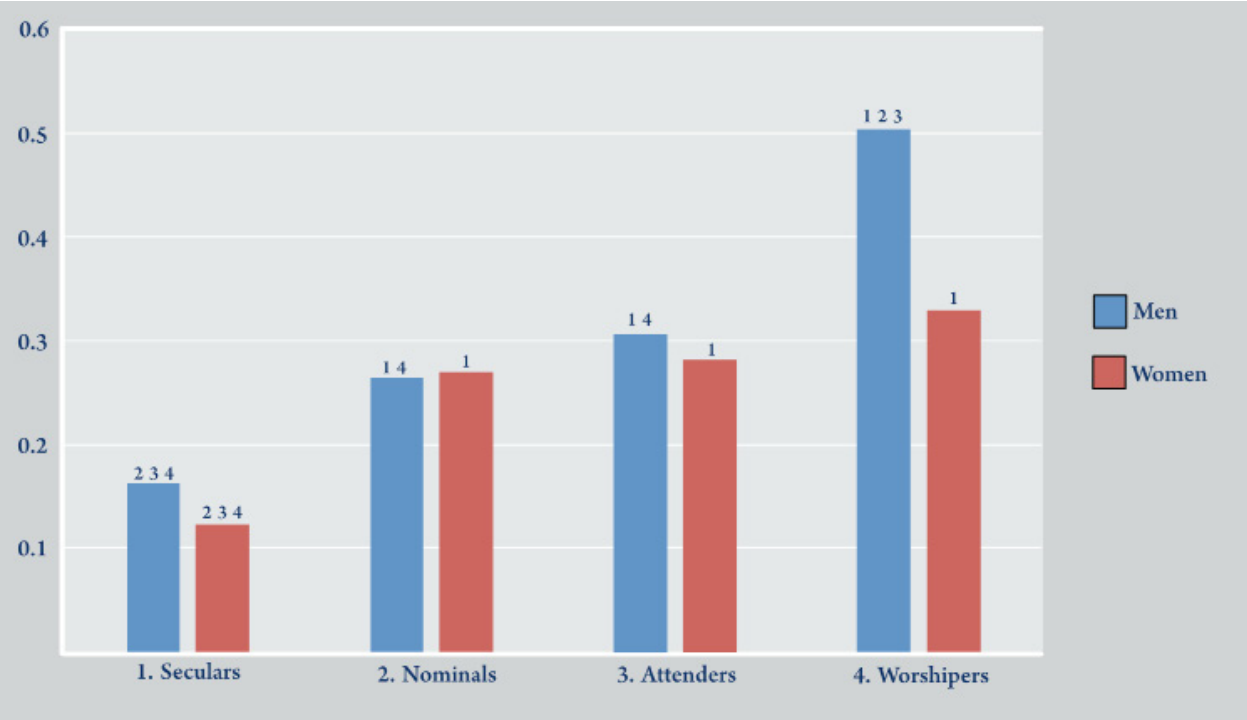
When it comes to happiness, religious dosage also appears to have a marked influence in people's lives. Respondents were asked to rate their current overall life happiness from "not at all happy" to "extremely happy." We then calculated the predicted probability of each religious dosage group reporting that they were in the highest levels of life happiness.

We found an increase in reported life happiness with each category of religious involvement. For men, Home Worshipers are significantly more likely to report higher levels of happiness than

Attenders, Nominals or Seculars (see Figure 5). In terms of magnitude, Home Worshiper men are more than twice as likely to report a high level of happiness than men with no religious involvement. Specifically, approximately 50% of Home Worshiper men report a high level of life happiness, whereas only about 30% of less religious men and 15% of Secular men report similar levels of happiness.

FIGURE 5: Life Happiness

Probability of reporting an “extremely happy” level of overall life happiness



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

For women, the association between life happiness and higher levels of religious involvement is slightly less pronounced, but still notable. While Home Worshiper women report the highest probability of being very happy, with approximately one third in the highest happiness levels, they are not statistically different from Attender, Nominal, or Secular women in this pattern. However, all three groups of religious women report significantly higher levels of happiness than Secular women. Thus, similar to the pattern found in men, Home Worshiper women are more than twice as likely to report they are very happy with their life than Secular women.

In the United States, we found a similar pattern, with Home Worshiper men and women reporting the highest levels of life happiness. However, in contrast to the international sample, the U.S. pattern is more notable for women than for men. Home Worshiper women in the United States were significantly more likely to report that they have a high level of life happiness than Nominal or Secular women. Women with fewer reported religious worship patterns are also more likely than Secular women to report high life satisfaction. In terms of magnitude, Nominal women are still about twice as likely as Secular women to report high life happiness; Home Worshiper women, meanwhile, are four times as likely as Secular women to report a high level of life happiness.

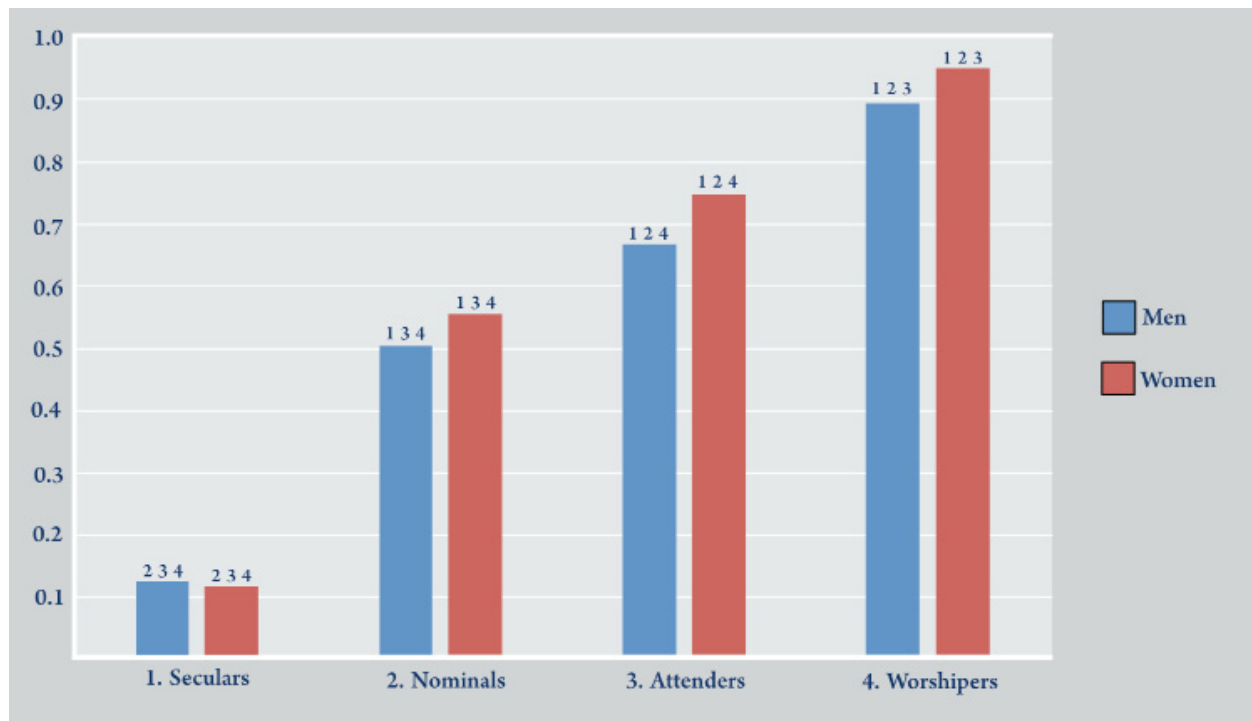
FEELING GOD'S LOVE

Another common purpose of religion is to connect adherents to the Divine and to imbue life with a sense of God's love and presence. Renowned religion and marriage researchers Annette Mahoney and Ken Pargament have called this presence "sanctification." Sanctification refers to the process whereby an aspect of one's life is perceived as having divine character and significance.⁸

In order to examine the relationship between levels of religious participation and personal spiritual experiences, we asked respondents to what extent they experience God's love in their life (e.g., "I feel God's love for me"). Seculars, with no church attendance or personal religious practices, are very unlikely to report feeling God's love for them (see Figure 6). But, for religious respondents there was a striking difference in their frequency of feeling God's love based on the level or dosage of religious practice. Specifically, Nominals and Attenders have a .5 to .75 probability (i.e., 50% to 75% chance) of reporting they feel God's love, whereas the probability among Home Worshipers is between .9 to .95 (i.e., 90% to 95% chance). With regard to feeling God's love, we found similar patterns in the United States and international samples.

FIGURE 6: Feel God's Love For Me

Probability of reporting "I feel God's love for me" on a daily basis



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

⁸ Pargament, K. I., & Mahoney, A. (2005). Sacred matters: Sanctification as a vital topic for the psychology of religion." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 15(3), 179-198.

While much of religion's influence is felt in the communal practice of shared church attendance, worshipping at home appears to have a unique influence. This may be connected in part to daily prayer, a practice common to many different faiths. The act of daily prayer provides an ongoing means of seeking communion with God in one's life and creates the opportunity for individuals, couples, and families to deepen the sense of sanctification they feel in various parts of their lives. Also, patterns of home worship shared by family members, such as family prayer and reading scriptures, create regular touch points that may provide increased opportunities to connect one's life to the Divine. This personalization of religion, coupled with the familization of religion, likely helps refine religious people's motivations to engage in religious behaviors and helps them avoid the sense of just going through the motions in their spiritual lives. These patterns also appear to have personal consequences for how frequently individuals feel the presence of God's love in their lives.



SECTION III - RELIGION AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

While studies on religion often focus on personal religious involvement, scholars have recognized that couples who share similar levels of faith commitment and participate together in religious activities report greater marital happiness and are also less likely to divorce⁹. But many of these studies are dated. With a rise of the religiously unaffiliated and other societal shifts, it's worth asking whether the benefits of shared religious activity still hold today. Furthermore, does a couple's shared lack of participation in religious activities produce the same outcomes previously found in studies of couples with shared religious participation?

We asked respondents in each of the four groups - Seculars, Nominals, Attenders, and Home Worshipers - to report whether or not their partner is "less religious," "as religious," or "more religious" than they are. We sought to isolate whether unity between partners in level of religious participation or nonparticipation is associated with relationship quality, emotional closeness, sexual satisfaction, shared decision making, money problems, or loving behaviors in married and cohabiting relationships.



⁹ Call, V. R., & Heaton, T. B. (1997). Religious influence on marital stability. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 382–392. Glenn, N. D. (1982). Interreligious marriage in the United States: Patterns and recent trends. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 44(3): 555–566; Scanzoni, J., & Arnett, C. (1987). Enlarging the understanding of marital commitment via religious devoutness, gender role preferences, and locus of marital control. *Journal of Family Issues*, 8(1), 136–156.

We classified respondents into one of eight different couple types (abbreviated as noted in Figures 7-15). These eight groups include¹⁰:

Shared Secular Couples (Sec=-): Secular respondents whose partners are “as religious” or “less religious” than they are. They represent 24% of the international sample.

Split Secular Couples (Sec+): Secular respondents whose partners are “more religious” than they are. They represent 5% of the international sample.

Split Nominal Couples (Nom-): Nominal respondents whose partners are “less religious” than they are. They represent 21% of the international sample. Shared Nominal Couples:

Split Attender Couples (Nom=+): Nominal respondents whose partners are “as religious” or “more religious” than they are. They represent 27% of the international sample.

Split Attender Couples (Att-): Attender respondents whose partners are “less religious” than they are. They represent 4% of the international sample.

Shared Attender Couples (Att=+): Attender respondents whose partners are “as religious” or “more religious” than they are. They represent 10% of the international sample.

Split Home-Worshiper Couples (Wor-): Home Worshiper respondents whose partners are “less religious” than they are. They represent 2% of the international sample.

Shared Home-Worshiper Couples (Wor=+): Home Worshiper respondents whose partners are “as religious” or “more religious” than they are. They represent 7% of the international sample.

¹⁰ Note that adding up the couple religious types, for instance, Shared Secular and Split Secular, does not add up to the same percentages of overall Seculars because this is limited only to couple respondents.

OVERALL TRENDS

Our analysis found that in all of the countries we sampled, respondents who are in Shared Home Worshiper Couples (couples that regularly attend church and regularly practice home worship together) have significantly better levels of relationship quality, emotional closeness, and higher sexual satisfaction. Shared Home Worshiper Couples also report significantly higher levels of shared decision making between partners, fewer money problems, and more frequent patterns of loving behavior such as forgiveness, commitment, and kindness than their less-religious peers.

This overall pattern was found for both women and men but was particularly strong among women. These patterns hold true even when controlling for income, education, married or cohabiting status, presence of children in the home, parental divorce, and other factors known to be associated with relationship quality. This may suggest that countries with declining levels of religious engagement also could be at risk for a corresponding decrease in relationship quality and stability.

Additionally, unity in increased faith observance continues to benefit couples beyond simply acting together. Our analysis finds little evidence that Shared Secular Couples experience benefits similar to Shared Home Worshiper Couples. There was some evidence of benefit for Shared Nominal and Shared Attender couples. But these effects were not as influential, in either significance or magnitude, as the effects linked to the regular practice of joint church attendance together with home worship.



RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

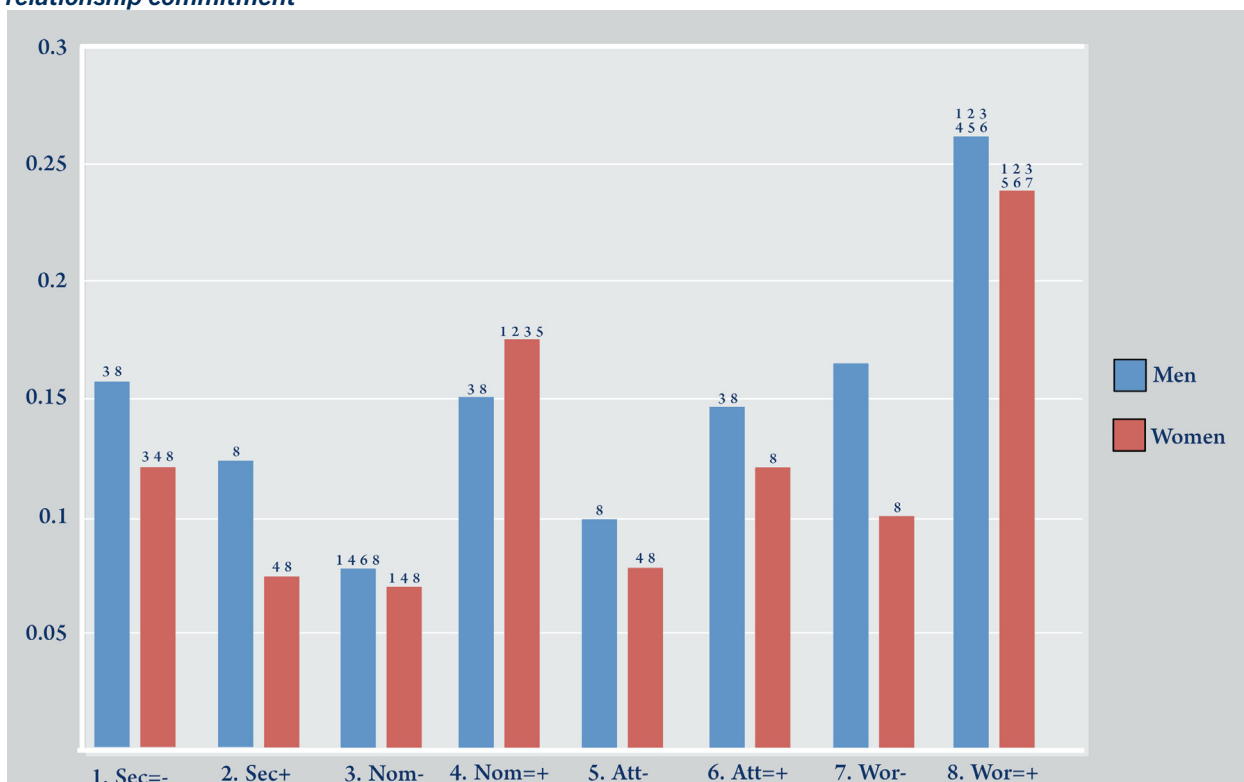
We calculated the predicted probability of respondents reporting that they have a high level of relationship quality based on their agreement with three questions that were combined into a relationship quality scale. The items measured respondents' relationship satisfaction (i.e., "I am satisfied with my overall relationship with my partner"), relationship stability (i.e., "In the past 12 months, I have had serious doubts that my relationship will last"), and relationship commitment ("My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life"). Each question was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. As noted in Figure 7, women and men in the Shared HomeWorshiper category were significantly more likely to report experiencing a higher quality relationship than less religious or nonreligious couples.

Women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples are twice as likely as women in Shared Secular Couples to report high relationship quality; Home Worshiper men are about 1.5 times more likely to report being in a high quality relationship than their Shared Secular peers.

In contrast to respondents whose partners had different levels of religious participation (i.e., couples in the Split categories), both men and women whose partners had similar levels of religious involvement or noninvolvement i.e., couples in the Shared categories) generally reported higher quality relationships, although these patterns were mixed in terms of statistical significance.

FIGURE 7: Relationship Quality

Probability of strongly agreeing with an additive index of relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, and relationship commitment

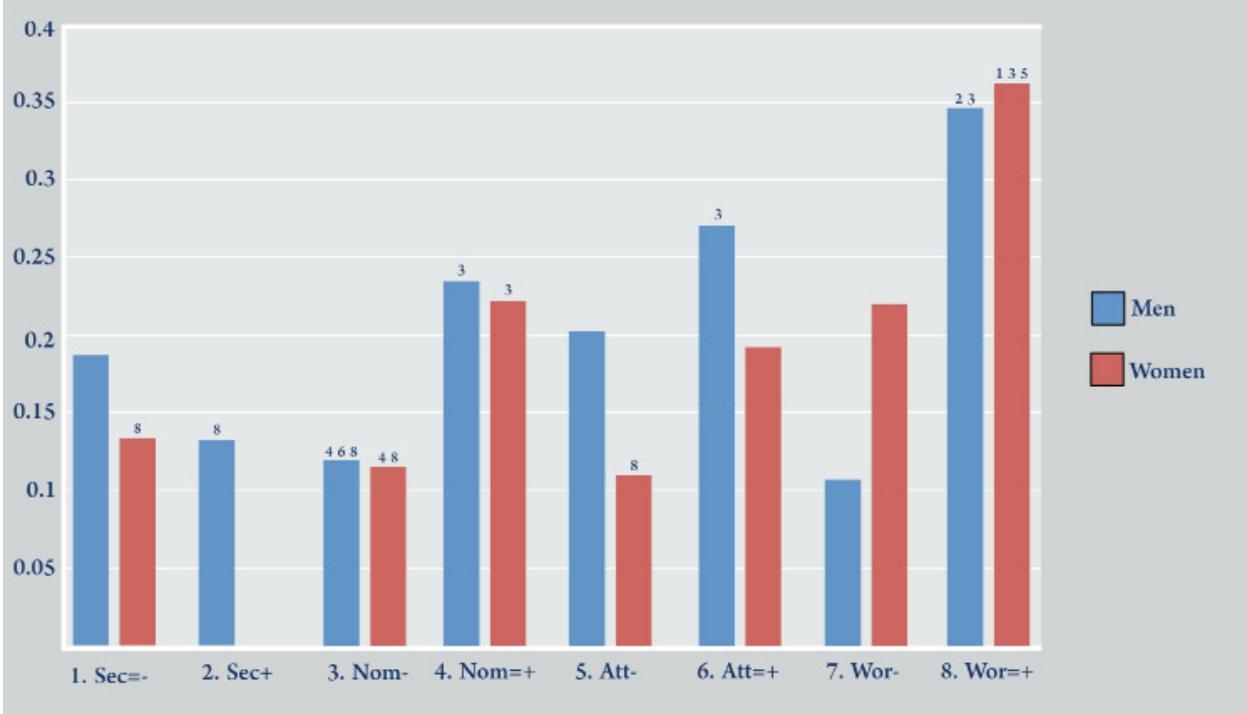


Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

In the United States, women and men in Shared Home Worshiper Couples also have the greatest likelihood of reporting that they are in a high-quality relationship, particularly compared to their counterparts in Shared or Split Secular relationships (see Figure 8). In the United States, respondents in Home Worshiper Couples are roughly twice as likely to report that they are in a high-quality marriage than women and men in Shared Secular Couples.

FIGURE 8: Relationship Quality In The United States

Probability of strongly agreeing with an additive index of relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, and relationship commitment



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

RELATIONSHIP FOUNDATIONS

What explains these differences in relationship quality? While the examination of relationship outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and relationship stability can describe differences between types of couples, they don't help explain why these differences exist. In order to better understand why differences exist between couples with different levels of religious worship patterns, we sought to examine several areas of relationship functioning to determine where Shared Home Worshiper Couples are similar to or different from their less religious counterparts.



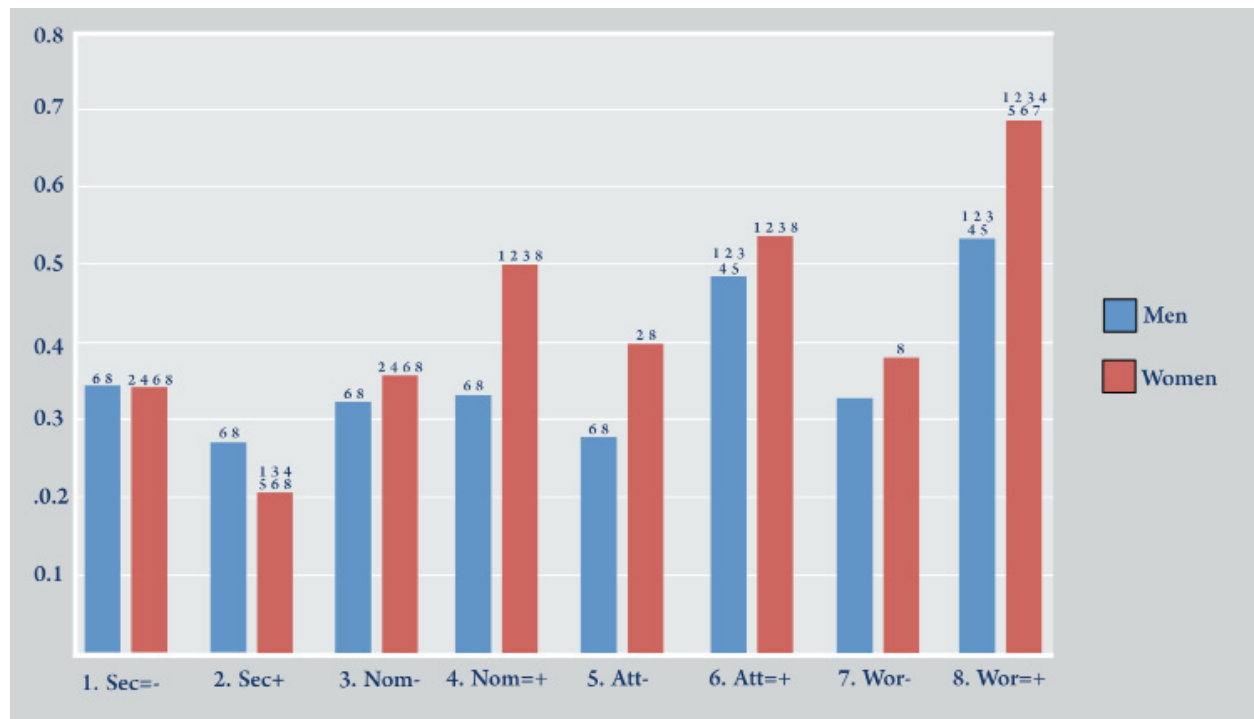
EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS

First, we analyzed the predicted probability of respondents having high levels of emotional closeness with their partner (i.e., “I feel close and engaged in our relationship”). Relationship experts emphasize the importance of emotional connection in the love bond between partners. A number of studies show that a strong emotional connection between partners fosters feelings of closeness, security, and mutual support within couples. A lack of emotional closeness, meanwhile, often leads to distance, distress, and communication problems.

As noted in Figure 9, we find that women in Shared Worshiper Couples are significantly more likely to report high levels of emotional closeness than less religious or non-religious women. Notably, women in Shared Worshiper Couples are nearly twice as likely to be in a relationship with deep emotional closeness than women in Shared Secular Couples.

FIGURE 9: Emotional Closeness

Probability of strongly agreeing that “I feel close and engaged in our relationship”



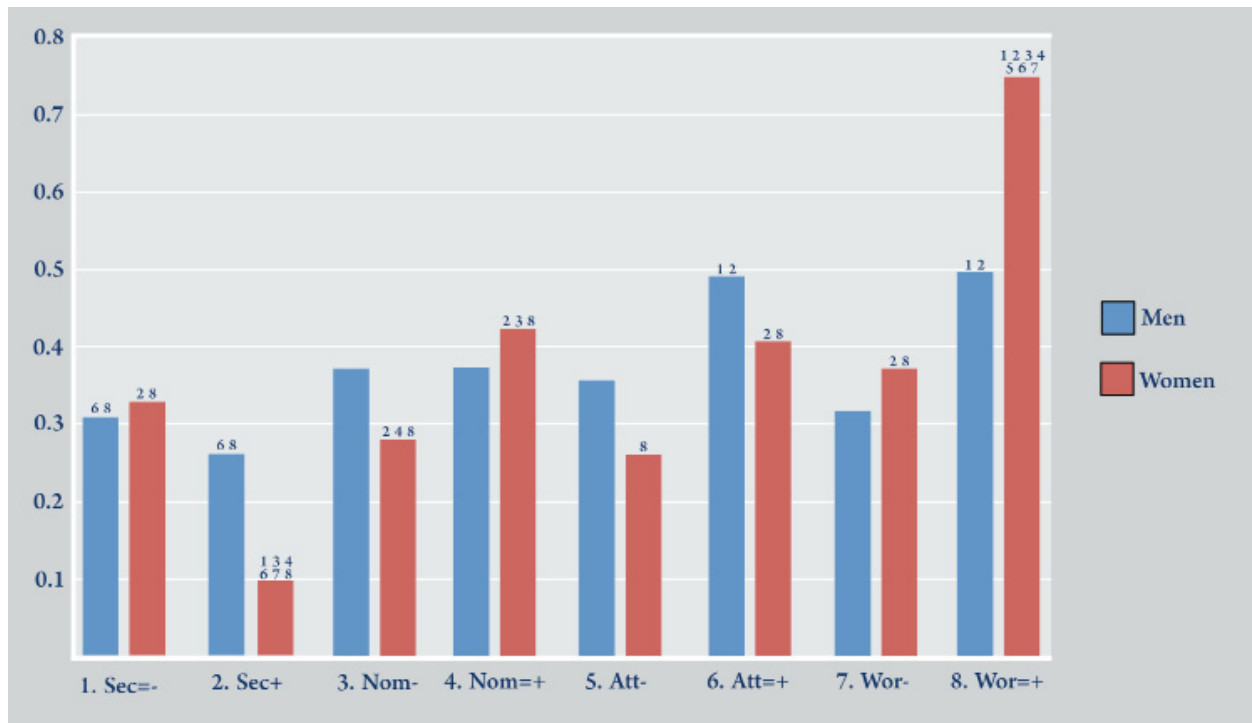
Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

Men in both Shared Attender Couples and Shared Home Worshiper Couples are significantly more likely to be in an emotionally close relationship than men in Shared Nominal Couples or Shared Secular Couples.

As noted in Figure 10, we found similar patterns of couple emotional closeness when we looked at couples in the United States. Women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples in the United States are significantly more likely to report that they feel emotionally close to their partner than women in all other types of relationships, both less religious and secular. Women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples are the only group where one could predict the majority of respondents would report high emotional closeness. In fact, women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples are more than twice as likely to be in a close relationship than women in Shared Secular Couples. These higher levels of couple closeness are not found among women in Shared Attender Couples or Shared Nominal Couples. Men in Shared Home Worshiper Couples are also significantly more likely to be emotionally connected in their marriage than men in Shared Secular Couples and Split Secular Couples, but are not higher than men in Attender Couples or Nominal Couples.

FIGURE 10: Emotional Closeness in the United States

Probability of strongly agreeing that “I feel close and engaged in our relationship”



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

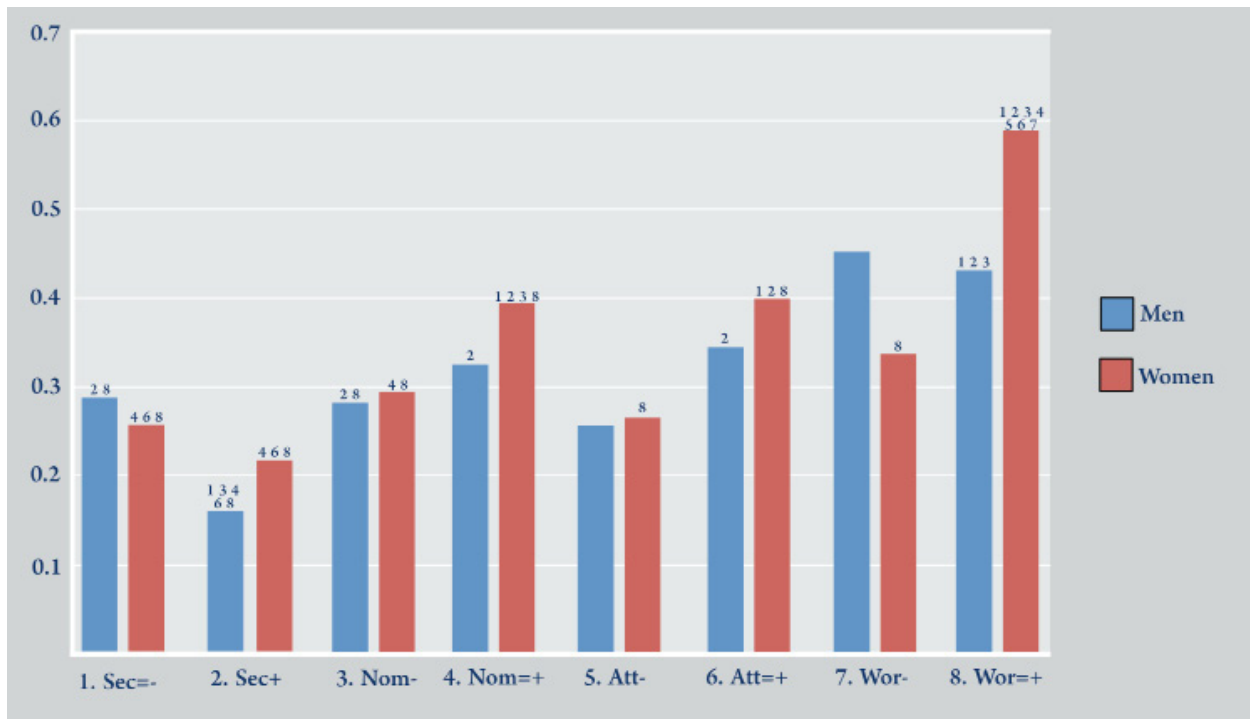
SEXUAL SATISFACTION

We also examined the predicted probability of couple respondents reporting the highest level of satisfaction with their sexual relationship. Similar to the patterns found with overall relationship quality, we found that women and men in the three shared religious categories (Shared Home Worshiper Couples, Shared Attender Couples, and Shared Nominal Couples) are significantly more likely to be highly satisfied with their sexual relationship than women and men in Shared Secular Couples (see Figure 11). Previous research has also found a strong association between religious participation and sexual satisfaction in marriage; however, our distinction between different levels of religious participation reveals a notable pattern for religious women. In Shared

Nominal Couples and Shared Attender Couples, women are 50% more likely to be sexually satisfied than women in Shared Secular Couples; but, even more pronounced, women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples are 50% more likely to be sexually satisfied than women in Shared Nominal Couples and Shared Attender Couples. Thus, women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples are twice as likely (probability = .59) to be sexually satisfied as women in Shared Secular Couples (probability = .26); but even more pronounced, women in Shared Home-Worshiper Couples are in fact 50% more likely to be sexually satisfied than women in Shared Nominal and Shared Attender couples.

FIGURE 11: Sexual Satisfaction

Probability of strongly agreeing that “I am satisfied with my sexual relationship with my partner”



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

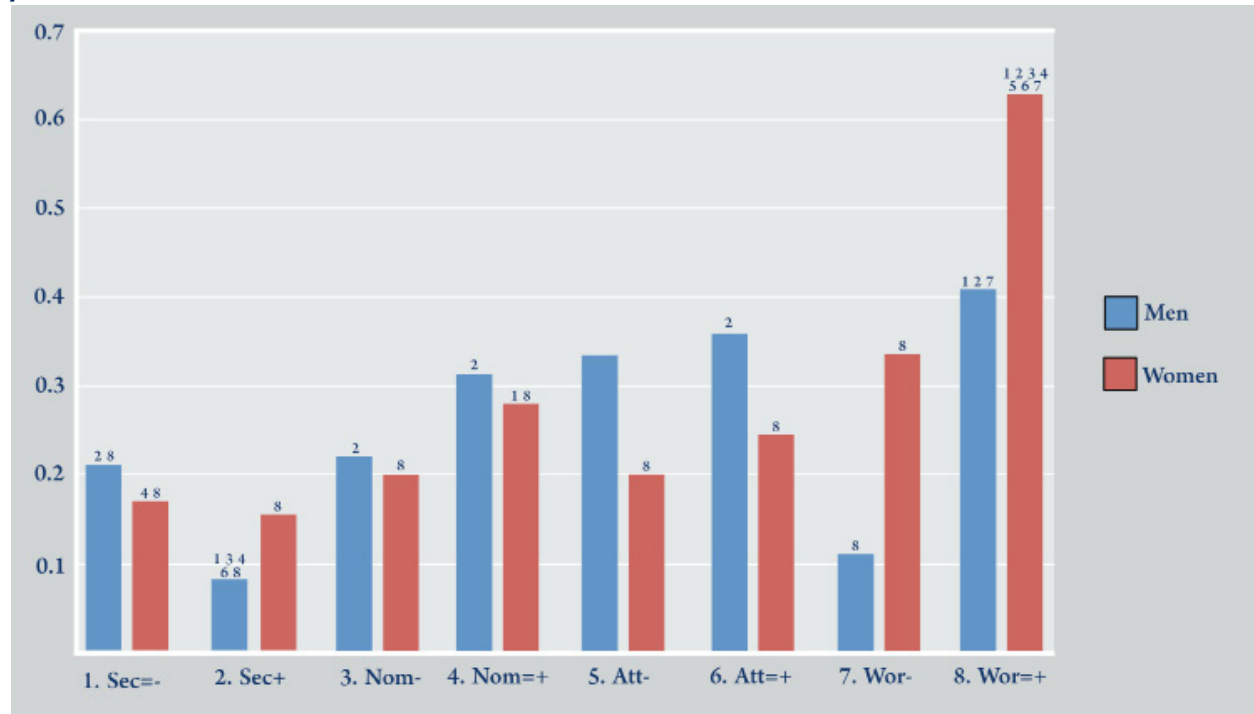
As noted in Figure 12, we found similar patterns in the United States, where women in Shared Home Worshipping Couples are three times as likely to report high sexual satisfaction as women in Shared Secular Couples. Two notable differences in the U.S. sample were the relatively low levels of sexual satisfaction in men who were in Split Home Worshiper relationships (i.e., the husband is a Home Worshiper but the wife is less religious) and men in Split Secular relationships (i.e., the husband is secular, but the wife is more religious). Also of note, the higher levels of sexual satisfaction found for Shared Home Worshiper Couples are not found in Shared Attender Couples, suggesting that the benefits of religion related to couple sexual satisfaction that have in past studies been counted for all highly religious couples, measured by attendance at services, are actually present when the dosage of religion involves both attendance and home religious practices.

These trends suggest that the association between religious participation and sexual satisfaction in marriage is deepened when partners are unified in regular home religious practices. This type of unity may help create a sort of spiritual intimacy that, when combined with the increased levels of

emotional intimacy discussed previously, greatly strengthens a couple’s sexual bond. Ultimately, loving and lasting relationships are ones where sexual intimacy is a meaningful physical manifestation of the emotional intimacy shared between the partners.

FIGURE 12: Sexual Satisfaction In The United States

Probability of strongly agreeing that “I am satisfied with my sexual relationship with my partner.”



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

SHARED DECISION MAKING

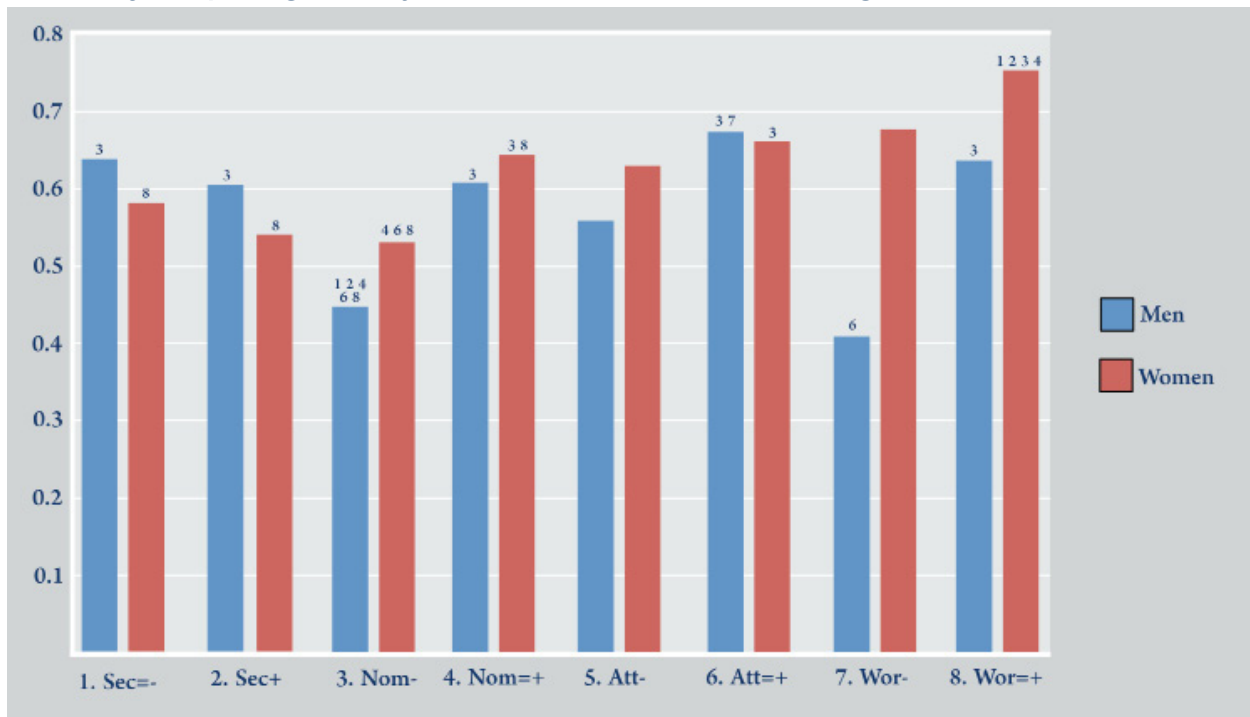
Shared decision making is rightly viewed as a hallmark of an enduring relationship. Accordingly, we examined respondents’ reports of the pattern used in their relationship for making “major household decisions” and whether these decisions were mostly made by one partner (self or partner) or mostly made together. As expected, we found that most men and women report making decisions as a couple. However, contrary to sometimes negative religious stereotypes, we found that women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples are significantly more likely to report joint decision making than women in Shared Secular Couples. We found similar levels of shared decision making among women in Shared Attender Couples. Men in most relationship types reported similar levels of shared decision making (see Figure 13). The same general patterns were found in an analysis of the United States sample.

We also examined what patterns of decision making are used when respondents report that decisions are not made together. These analyses showed that both women and men are most likely to report that decisions are “made by themselves” or that “partners switched in who makes the decision.” Only a small portion of respondents, among both women and men, reported that their partner makes most of the decisions.

Our analysis of shared decision-making patterns proved to be more balanced across religious participation couple types. But, on the whole, women in highly religious couples reported similar, or higher, levels of shared decision-making than their more secular counterparts. These findings on shared decision-making patterns in highly religious couples may challenge stereotypes about devout couples that sometimes favor traditional gender roles. Scholars have typically used terms like egalitarian to imply that gender equality is more possible in relationships where men and women divide family tasks in ways that are not defined by traditional gender roles. However, the comparatively high levels of shared decision making among highly religious couples, combined with their higher levels of emotional closeness, might prompt further inquiry into whether a shared vision of blending complementary and interdependent roles can contribute to high levels of relationship quality. A key element in these findings may be that equality of process helps partners decide important decisions together and support common family goals.

FIGURE 13: Shared Decision Making

Probability of reporting that major household decisions are made together.



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

MONEY PROBLEMS

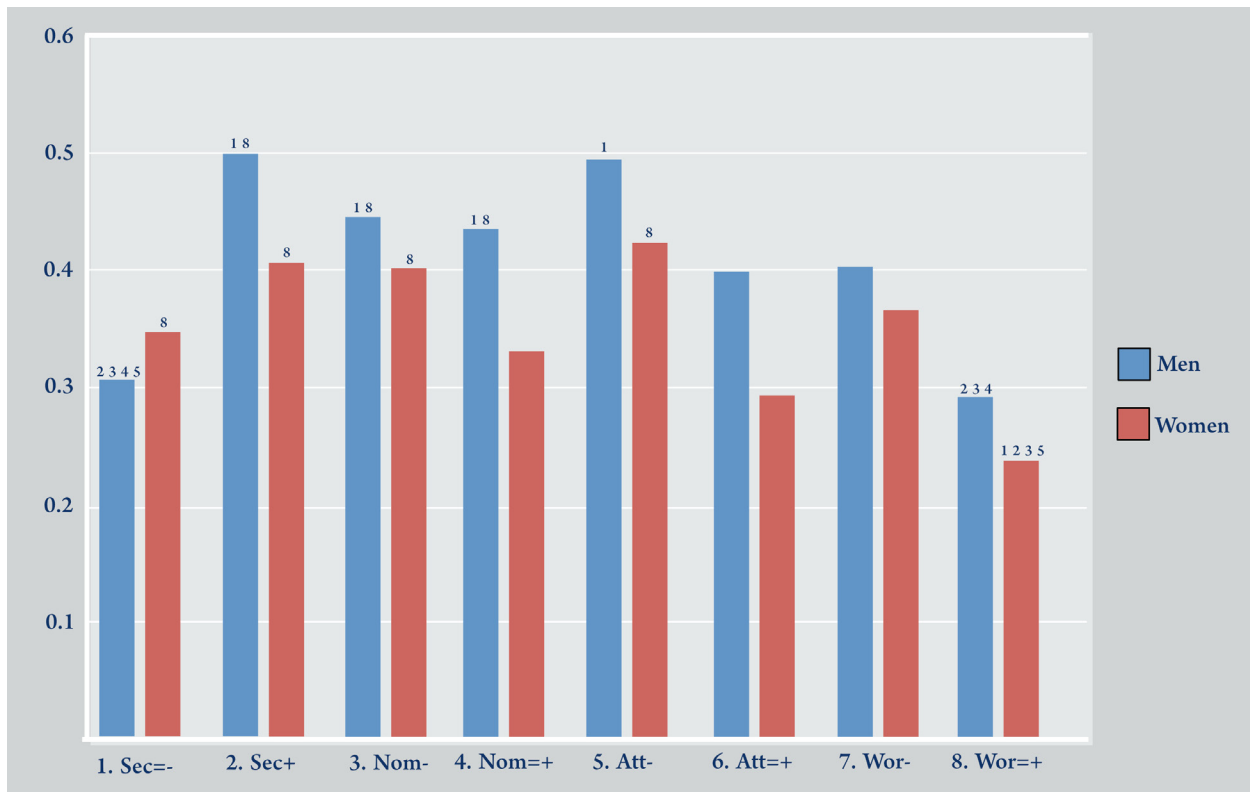
There is mixed evidence that financial problems are a salient feature in poor marital outcomes. This might be explained in part by the tendency of some scholars to assume that the relative frequency or importance of financial issues is the same across partners and couples. However, this may not be the case.

The impact of financial issues in marriage may also vary based on the relative importance partners place on the acquisition of financial or material goods. Most major religions often teach adherents to prioritize the spiritual dimension of life over material aspects of living; this may include avoiding materialism, giving to the poor, or being prudent and modest in the acquisition of temporal goods. This may be important, given that the degree to which partners hold a materialistic ideology may influence the level of financial distress they experience in marriage. A number of studies provide support for the idea that materialism can influence individual and relationship outcomes.

To investigate the possible impact of religious participation on financial matters within marriage, we asked our respondents “Does money cause problems in your relationship with your partner?” Respondents indicated either “yes” or “no” to this question. As noted in Figure 14, we found that money problems are relatively common and appear to impact between one fourth to one half of couples in our international sample, even after accounting for the financial situation of the family.

FIGURE 14: Money Problems

Probability of reporting that money “causes problems in your relationship”



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

Generally, we found that the probability of money problems is relatively consistent across religious participation groups. However, notably, women and men in Shared Home Worshiper Couples are significantly less likely to experience money problems than other couples. Again, similar patterns were found in the United States.

Given that these analyses control for income, it may be that these patterns are more due to personal values and priorities than they are about having more income or resources. Importantly, this does not mean that these couples experience less financial strain; it merely means that finances, however abundant or scarce, appear to generate fewer problems in these relationships. Carroll and colleagues¹¹ have suggested that materialistic partners may have a higher sensitivity to financial distress, thereby creating a lower threshold for couple financial issues to be defined as problematic. Simply put, higher levels of materialism may influence a partner or couple as to whether they define their financial situation as problematic. We should also note that materialism can impact the spending habits of partners and whether or not they experience stress or strain in their relationship due to debt or other kinds of poor financial management.

PARTNER VIRTUES

Researchers have begun investigating the role of partner virtues such as forgiveness, sacrifice, kindness, responsibility, and commitment in relationships. The emerging literature indicates that practicing these virtues is critical to strong, vibrant relationships. They help couples develop greater meaning, growth, relational giving, and goal sharing.

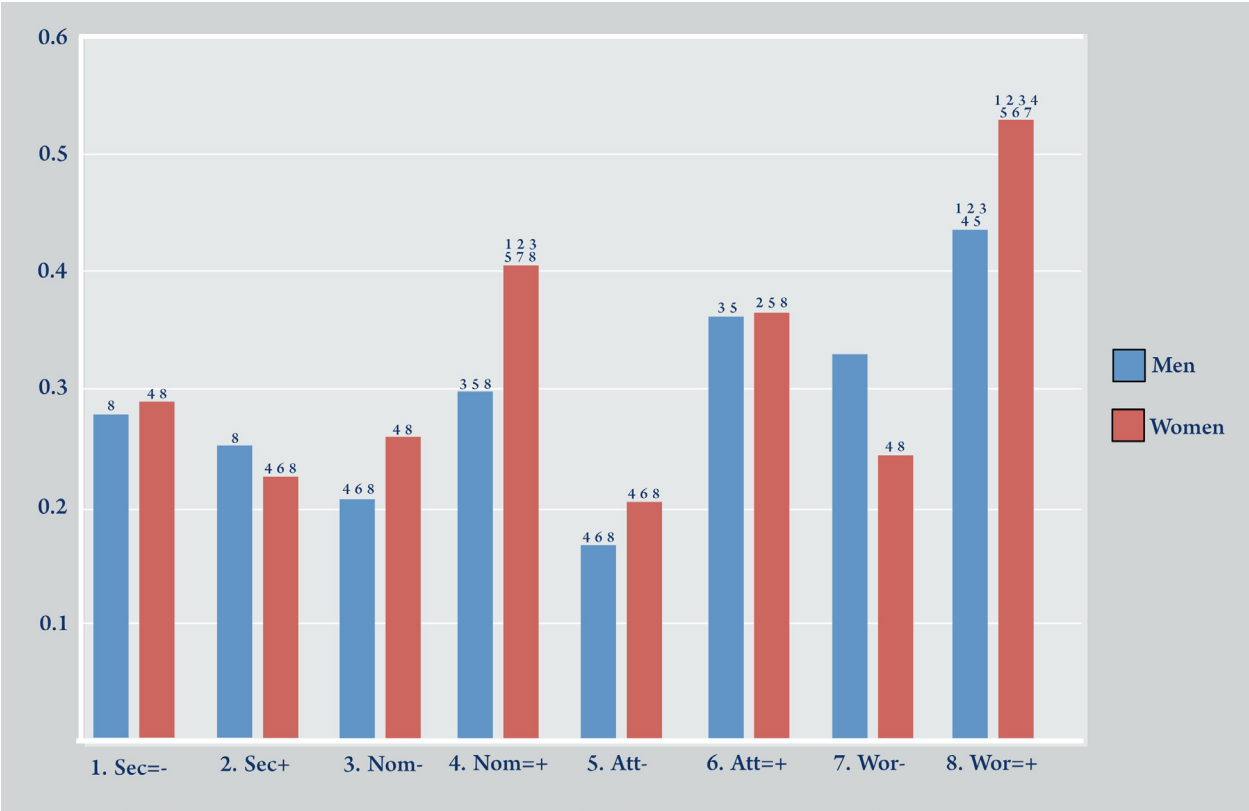
In the study, we sought to calculate the predicted probability of respondents reporting their partner's virtues within the relationship. We asked three questions that were combined into a "partner virtues scale." The items measured respondents' relationship experiences with forgiveness (i.e., "My partner is very forgiving when it comes to my weaknesses, flaws, and failures"), kindness (i.e., "Overall my partner shows kindness in the way he or she treats me"), and responsibility ("My partner is responsible - I can really count on him or her to get things done"). Each question was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Overall, women in religious relationships report significantly higher levels of their partners being forgiving, kind, and responsible in their relationships than women in secular relationships (see Figure 15). Women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples were the most likely to report that they strongly agree that their partner practices virtues in their relationship. Shared Home Worshiper men also reported significantly higher levels of their partners being forgiving and kind than men in secular and less religious relationships. In the United States, the pattern was similar with women in Shared Home Worshiper Couples reporting higher partner virtues, but men in Shared Home Worshiper Couples did not report elevated levels of partner virtue as they did in the international sample.

¹¹ Carroll, J. S., Dean, L. R., Larson, L., & Busby, D. M. (2011). Materialism and marriage: Couple profiles of congruent and incongruent spouses. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 10, 287–308; Dean, L. R., Carroll, J. S., & Yang, C. (2007). Materialism, perceived financial problems, and marital satisfaction. *Family Consumer Science Research Journal*, 35 (3), 260–281.

FIGURE 15: Partner Virtues

Probability of strongly agreeing with an additive index of partner virtues, including “my partner treats me with kindness,” “my partner is very forgiving to me,” and “my partner is responsible”



Note: Numbers above the bars indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly

SIGNIFICANCE WITH CONTROLS

It is worth noting that the controls in our analyses revealed consistent patterns across all of the relationship quality variables. Specifically, as expected, we found that income and education levels are consistently associated with higher levels of relationship quality. Also, across all of the countries we sampled, married couples reported significantly higher levels of relationship quality than cohabiting couples; couples with children in the home reported slightly lower levels of quality than couples without children in the home.

DISCUSSION

When this study was designed, our focus was to investigate how religion was being practiced in diverse countries around the globe and to see how different patterns of religious practice influence individuals and couples in the modern world. As we noted earlier, most of the studies that examine these questions are now 20 to 30 years old, and with the rise of secularism and other societal shifts in our contemporary culture it's worth looking into whether the benefits of religious activity still hold today. The preponderance of the evidence from these analyses done with both international respondents and those in the United States is that there continue to be significant effects resulting from the practice of religion in people's lives, particularly when these practices are embedded in the daily home life of individuals and couples.

However, as relevant as the findings of this report were in addressing the questions we had at the time we designed the study, they may be even more significant now. The rise of the COVID-19 global pandemic has profoundly heightened the significance of our findings, as increased numbers of faith-based individuals and couples are seeking ways to express and experience their religious beliefs. Of particular note are the consistent patterns we found regarding the benefits associated with home-based worship among many faith groups and families. Also, the uncertainty, stress, and struggle that have accompanied this pandemic put the quest for solace and meaning into a new light. Without a doubt, the significance of religion, and in particular home-based religious life, takes on new meaning in these circumstances.

The findings of this report have meaningful implications for individuals and families, as well as for policy makers and researchers of religion and family life, and deserve further attention. We reiterate and discuss several of these implications here.

THE MEASUREMENT OF RELIGIOSITY IN FUTURE STUDIES

First, we believe this study constitutes clear evidence of the deficiencies with measuring religiosity solely by church attendance. As we have shown repeatedly, there are many people in each of these 11 countries who regularly attend religious services, but who do not engage in regular home-based religious practices. When compared with those who not only attend regularly but also engage in such practices, the study's results suggest that religious dosage matters. Individuals who take religion's full dose, regardless of affiliation, appear to be more likely to report better individual outcomes, including more meaning in life and greater happiness. This benefit also extends to relational outcomes, where Home Worshiper Couples report higher levels of relationship quality, emotional closeness, and sexual satisfaction, particularly among women.

Combining Home Worshiper Couples with Attender Couples not only obfuscates these differences, but could also lead to the erroneous conclusion that the religious dosage effect is smaller than it actually is. Religion, it appears, is one way for people to find meaning and connection. The extent to which one engages in religious practices, not surprisingly, is predictive of the extent to which one gains the anticipated benefits of religion; separating those who engage fully from those who engage only somewhat makes bare the reality of this conclusion. Future research on this and related topics should consider the implications of measuring one's religious participation solely using religious attendance, as the results may in fact run counter to what one may find with a richer measurement of religiosity using home-based religious practices.

RELIGIOUS TRENDS AROUND THE GLOBE

Religious trends vary substantially around the globe and links between family and religious practices and outcomes must account for this variation. In highly religious places, such as Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and even the United States, religion plays a visible role in the civic and political spheres and many people have personal experience, to varying degrees, with religious teachings and practices. In other countries, such as France, the United Kingdom, and Australia, religion's influence is mostly seen in historical rather than contemporary terms, leading highly religious people there to feel that they are different in kind from their fellow citizens rather than feeling different in degree, as they might experience if they lived in a more religious country.



One interesting implication of this reality is that the influence of religion may play out differently depending on the country of one's residence. One social science-based explanation for this is known as the minority stress hypothesis, which suggests that one's minority status in a given society often leads to stigma, resulting in consistent psychosocial stress, with concomitant physiological and mental health implications.¹² While this hypothesis has primarily been applied

to work on health disparities among sexual and racial minorities, it's worth exploring whether minority religious status—whether atheist, agnostic, highly religious, Jew, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim—is linked to individual, relational, or societal outcomes. Importantly, we would not equate the stigma associated with minority religious status in contemporary society with that of being a sexual or racial-ethnic minority. We acknowledge that religion has sometimes been misused as a force of oppression based on sexual, racial/ethnic, and religious identity. Previous research has found that national context and religious minority status can influence both public and private behaviors.¹³

Additionally, given the United States' unique religious demography, we would expect the United States to be a key front in this religious divide. As we've shown, the United States has roughly equal numbers of people who regularly attend religious services (and many who engage in additional home-based religious practices) and those who never attend or worship. No other country

12 Meyer, I. H. (1995). Minority stress and mental health in gay men. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 36(1), 38–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137286>

13 Meyer, I. H. (1995). Minority stress and mental health in gay men. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 36(1), 38–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137286>

examined has this unique situation. Thus, highly religious people are neither dominant nor a small minority in the religious pluralism of the United States. Roughly one third of the country is overtly and consistently religious, one third never engage in any religious practice, and one third engages in some form of, albeit inconsistent, religious behavior. This religious distribution, combined with the fact that these groups tend to segregate themselves (Seculars along the coasts and the highly religious in the South, Midwest, and Intermountain West) leads to important implications about why we see such entrenchment along political, economic, and social lines. The resulting insularity may explain to some extent the partisan lens that often overshadows all topics, even global health pandemics such as COVID-19. The implications of such insularity can readily be seen at the national level, where conflicts over the nation's soul are most readily apparent. Political, economic, and social entrenchment may therefore come as less of a surprise when viewed from the lens of the United States' unique religious demography.

RELIGION AND THE MODERN CRISIS OF MEANINGLESS

As we noted previously, current trends of depression, anxiety, and suicide have been in the headlines on a regular basis, and indications are that the pandemic has negatively impacted mental health problems in significant ways. While there are many factors that are contributing to these trends, and there is no simple solution to addressing them, this analysis suggests that it is time to more fully understand the crisis of meaninglessness that grips our modern society. Both in personal and collective ways, we need to further study how individuals, couples, and families can build lives with more meaning and connection.

It is clear from the findings of this report that religion can factor prominently in personal reflection and social discussion about enhancing meaning and happiness in many people's lives. We found that religiously engaged individuals, particularly those who participate in patterns of home worship such as prayer and family religious discussions, are significantly more likely to have a regular sense of meaning and satisfaction. It appears that religion still matters in the modern world in its ability to give individuals a sense of life direction and purpose. It's important to note that this held true for people of different faiths living in different countries around the globe.

But the personal benefits for religious involvement and practice are not simply between the religious and the nonreligious. As we've noted throughout this report, there is a real sense that religion needs to be experienced at a sufficient dosage to impact people's lives to the fullest degree. For example, we found that Home Worshipers are different from Attenders and Nominals in the sense of sanctification in their lives and how much they feel God's love. Since it is a primary goal of nearly all faith groups to connect their adherents to the Divine, our findings suggest that many faith-based individuals and families are not getting a sufficient dosage of religion in their lives if they want to experience the full range of benefits religious life offers and provides. In short, it appears that religious adherents who are "all in" get a fuller effect of faith-based living, and that includes daily and weekly patterns of religious practices in the home.

THE COUPLE THAT PRAYS TOGETHER STAYS TOGETHER

One of the most significant insights from our analyses is the way that home-based religious practices benefit couples when partners are unified in prioritizing religion in family life. But what accounts for the strengthening power of Shared Home Worshiper Couples when it comes to personal

happiness, life meaning, and relationship quality around the globe? The analyses presented in this report indicate that there are clear links between religious activity or religious dosage and beneficial outcomes for individuals and couples.

Certainly part of the story here may be due to selection—it could simply be that prosocial, relationship-oriented people self-select into religious communities because they already resonate with the marriage and family-centered patterns of religious communities. Moreover, some people may be more active in church attendance partly because they are happier, rather than the other way around.

But with growing secularism in many countries around the globe, it's unlikely that selection fully explains these patterns. This is because secularism is on the rise in a variety of different types of countries on every populated continent, suggesting that the selection mechanisms would have to be so widely applicable that they account for the trend in dozens of economic, social, political, familial, and religious contexts. Such a variable is not readily apparent. If, on the other hand, secularism were only on the rise in certain types of countries, the evidence of selection might be stronger.



In fact, our findings lend new contemporary evidence for some of the long-recognized mechanisms associated with the benefits of religious participation. Specifically, these explanations can be organized around the beliefs, behaviors, and belonging that shared religious participation, both in church attendance and home worship practices, provide for couples and families.

Part of the reason faith matters is that it fosters beliefs—such as a commitment to marital permanence and fidelity—that tend to strengthen marriages. In various ways, religious communities often emphasize commitment in marriage relationships and encourage prioritizing family life and child well-being as a significant part of religious devotion. In almost all world faiths, marriage and family relationships are held up as something sacred, and, therefore, deserving of the highest attention in people's life priorities. Religious teachings also often place a strong emphasis on love, forgiveness, respectful behavior, and putting the needs of others above one's own. This emphasis on virtuous living may also improve the quality of married life and lower the likelihood of divorce. Therefore, as Curtis and Ellison have observed, regular involvement in religious practices may “reinforce beliefs about the sanctity of marriage, while helping to define appropriate marital conduct and assisting partners in fulfilling their familial roles.”¹⁴

Second, previous studies have shown that shared religious behaviors between partners help account for the link between church attendance and a happy relationship.¹⁵ Previous studies show

14 Curtis, K. T., & Ellison, C. G. (2002). Religious heterogamy and marital conflict: Findings from the National Survey of Families and Households. *Journal of Family Issues*, 23, 551–576.

15 Wilcox, W. B., & Wolfinger, N. H. (2008). Living and loving “decent”: Religion and relationship quality among urban parents. *Social Science Research*, 37(3), 828–843.

that prayer and other shared personal religious activities help couples deal with stress, enable them to focus on shared hopes for the future, and allow them to deal constructively with challenges and problems in their relationship.¹⁶ In simple terms, it appears that more often than not the couple that prays together flourishes together.

Previous research also indicates that a sense of belonging and social support also helps explain the power of joint church attendance and home religious practices.¹⁷ Religious communities can also support marriages through classes and seminars, publications, and pastoral counseling, which may promote improved communication and conflict resolution. Religious institutions often provide various types of family support, including a place for families to get to know one another and build relationships, programs for children, marital and premarital counseling, and retreats and workshops focused on building a good marriage.

It is important to note that a sense of belonging is not simply between religious individuals and their fellow adherents, but may also extend to their sense of belonging with God. Mahoney, Pargament, and colleagues have greatly advanced understanding of how religious meanings are related to personal wellbeing, marital quality, and family relationships. For example, to examine sanctification in marriage relationships, they assessed the extent to which partners feel the presence of God in their marriage (e.g., “God is present in my marriage,” “My marriage is influenced by God’s actions in our lives.”) and whether they believe their marriage has sacred qualities.¹⁸ A series of studies have found that perceived sanctification is related to marital satisfaction, greater collaboration between partners, less conflict in resolving disagreements, and greater investment in marriage.

It appears that shared secular couples, on average, don’t receive the same benefits of shared religion. Perhaps shared secularism may sometimes lack the same kind of coherent paradigm that gives life meaning or provides regular, consistent messages of virtuous living and sacred meaning within a marriage. Our findings lend support to the observation of leading marriage scholars, who have noted that, “religion has the apparent potential to help couples build marital intimacy, stimulate companionship, and perhaps offer unique cognitive and behavioral resources for couples dealing with marital stressors.”¹⁹

SUGGESTED CITATION

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