



from the November 14, 2005 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1114/p15s02-cogn.html>

It's true: Churchgoers are wealthier

By [David R. Francis](#)

Can religion fatten your pocket book? Sunday morning TV evangelists sometimes assert that God will help financially those who pray to Him. Some of the rich believe their prosperity is a sign of God's grace.

Now an economist has found a statistical correlation between attending church (or a temple or mosque) and a "better economic outcome."

On average, his paper notes, a household with double the rate of religious attendance as another household has 9.1 percent more income. That extra participation in religious activity decreases welfare participation by 16 percent from the usual rate. It lowers the odds of being divorced by 4 percent and increases the odds of being married by 4.4 percent.

The paper does not investigate the mechanism by which religiosity creates these results, notes its author, Jonathan Gruber, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. He's "not validating" that God has anything to do with the extra prosperity. "I can't dispute it either," Mr. Gruber adds.

Economists have long had an interest in religion. Adam Smith's first book, written in 1759, dealt with human motives and activities under "a beneficent Providence." The Scottish professor of moral philosophy's second book, "Wealth of Nations," published in 1776, is regarded as the basis of capitalism.

Many of today's economists, while striving to be scientific in their scholarly work, retain a fascination with religion. Their research finds that religious participation correlates with lower levels of deviant or criminal behavior, and better health. Further, attending religious services weekly, rather than not at all, has the same effect on individuals' self-reported happiness as moving from the bottom quarter of the income distribution (that is, people who are poor or near poor) up to the top quarter (the well-to-do).

Americans are somewhat religious. Two-fifths of the public attend church in a typical week. Polls indicate that 95 percent profess belief in the existence of God or a universal spirit. Reflecting this interest, Americans gave \$88 billion to religious groups in 2004, thereby accounting for more than one-third of all charitable giving, both corporate and individual.

Given their training, economists tend to think of religion as a type of market (as did Adam Smith) affected by both selfish interests and altruism.

Economist Gruber, for example, speculates that the link between religious attendance and greater prosperity may stem from four factors. One is that going to religious services provides more social interactions and thus more useful connections. (One statistical base for his paper hangs on "religious market density," a tendency for people of the same faith to live in the same areas - Catholics with Catholics, Jews with Jews, etc.)

Another factor could be more attendance at religious schools of the children of highly religious families. That could provide better schooling or contacts for adult life.

Or, Gruber continues, it could be that those "with more faith may be less stressed out about daily problems that impede success in the labor market and the marriage market, and are therefore more successful."

A fourth factor may be that church attendance can offer forms of financial and emotional insurance. Many churches and other religious groups provide charity (clothes, food, money) to members in trouble, as well as the comfort of visits, consolation, advice, and so on, that can revive a troubled family.

A recent study, also published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in Cambridge, Mass., finds just that - that religious involvement provides a kind of insurance from "wealth shocks," such as a demotion or a lost job.

If the income of a religious white household drops by 10 percent, its consumption of nondurable goods, such as food and clothing, falls at a rate that's 35 percent slower than a similar nonchurch-going household.

Just believing is not enough, explains one of three authors of the study, Erzo Luttmer of Harvard University. The individuals must attend religious activities. The poorest individuals benefit most.

One interesting finding is that measurements of happiness differ between blacks and whites, Professor Luttmer notes. Whites tend to belong to religious organizations where assistance is more likely to be given in cash. But an expectation to repay or a stigma attached to such assistance leads to no change in the level of happiness for the recipients.

By contrast, assistance in black churches is more likely to be in the form of social support, meals, or clothing. Because such benefits don't show up in consumption statistics, a positive effect in this area is barely visible. But the self-reported happiness of churchgoing black families hit by a wealth shock - families getting moral or doctrinal support - falls less than that of nonchurch blacks.

The Bible quotes Jesus as saying that "your Father knoweth ye have need of these things." Economists neither deny or affirm that God helps out. To them, the added well-being of the religious may be merely a social phenomenon - or not.

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