

The Cultural Policy Studies Project

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WHY RELIGION MATTERS: THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE ON SOCIAL STABILITY

INTRODUCTION¹

By extolling freedom of religion in the schools, President Bill Clinton has raised the level of debate on the importance of religion to American life.² The time is ripe for a deeper dialogue on the contribution of religion to the welfare of the nation.

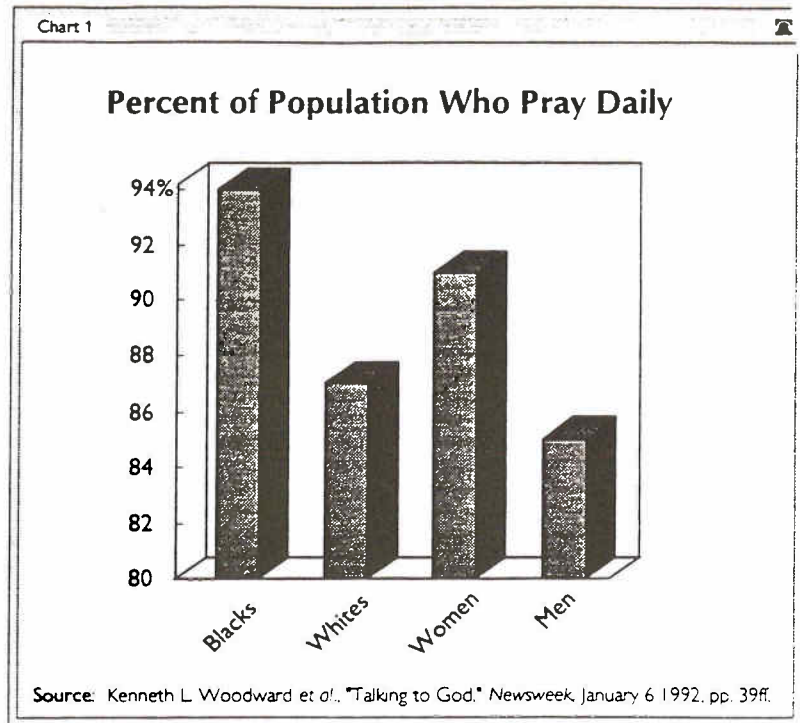
America has always been a religious country. "Its first Christian inhabitants were only too anxious to explain what they were doing and why," explains historian Paul Johnson. "In a way the first American settlers were like the ancient Israelites. They saw themselves as active agents of divine providence."³ Today, he adds, "it is generally accepted that more than half the American people still attend a place of worship over a weekend, an index of religious practice unequaled anywhere in the world, certainly in a great and populous nation."⁴

At the heart of religious practice is prayer: Americans pray even more than they go to church. According to a composite of surveys, 94 percent of blacks, 91 percent of women, 87 percent of whites, and 85 percent of men regard themselves as people who pray regularly. Some 78 percent pray at least once per week, and 57 percent pray daily. Even among

- 1 The author wishes to draw special attention to the major initial source of information on the research done on religion in the social and medical sciences: David B. Larson and Susan S. Larson, "The Forgotten Factor in Physical and Mental Health: What Does the Research Show?" (Rockville, Md.: National Institute for Healthcare Research, 1994). David Larson is one of the premier researchers in the field and serves as president of the National Institute for Healthcare Research, as well as adjunct faculty member at the Northwestern University and Duke University Medical Schools.
- 2 Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President on Religious Liberty in America at James Madison High School, Vienna, Virginia, July 12, 1995."
- 3 Paul Johnson, "God and the Americans," *Commentary*, January 1995, pp. 25-45.
- 4 *Ibid.*

the 13 percent of the population who call themselves agnostics or atheists, some 20 percent pray daily.⁵

When policymakers consider America's grave social problems, including violent crime and rising illegitimacy, substance abuse, and welfare dependency, they should heed the findings in the professional literature of the social sciences on the positive consequences that flow from the practice of religion.⁶



For example, there is ample evidence that:

- ✓ The strength of the family unit is intertwined with the practice of religion. Churchgoers⁷ are more likely to be married, less likely to be divorced or single, and more likely to manifest high levels of satisfaction in marriage.
- ✓ Church attendance is the most important predictor of marital stability and happiness.
- ✓ The regular practice of religion helps poor persons move out of poverty. Regular church attendance, for example, is particularly instrumental in helping young people to escape the poverty of inner-city life.
- ✓ Religious belief and practice contribute substantially to the formation of personal moral criteria and sound moral judgment.
- ✓ Regular religious practice generally inoculates individuals against a host of social problems, including suicide, drug abuse, out-of-wedlock births, crime, and divorce.
- ✓ The regular practice of religion also encourages such beneficial effects on mental health as less depression (a modern epidemic), more self-esteem, and greater family and marital happiness.

5 Kenneth L. Woodward et al., "Talking to God," *Newsweek*, January 6, 1992, pp. 39ff.

6 Many studies cited herein are 10-20 years old. The need to go back so far reflects the paucity of serious research in the area of religion relative to studies in the other four major institutions: family, education, the economy, and government. In the author's opinion, it also reflects the tension between religion and the social sciences. See "Religion and the Social Sciences," *infra*.

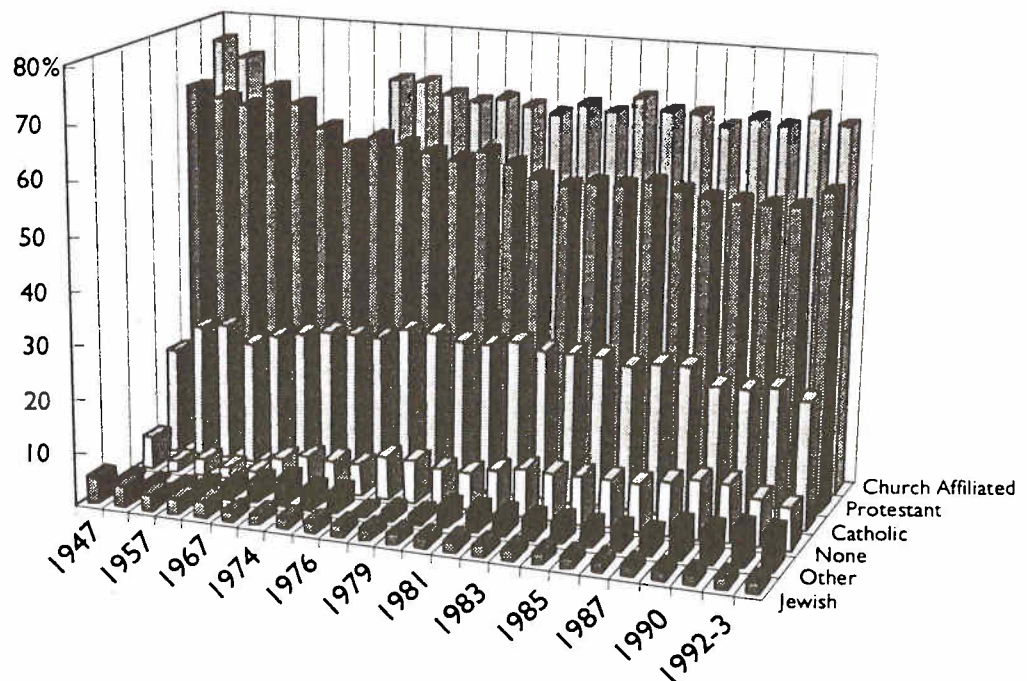
7 Throughout this study, "church" and "churchgoer" are used in the generic sense to indicate church, synagogue, or any other place of worship and an individual attending any such institution.

- ✓ In repairing damage caused by alcoholism, drug addiction, and marital breakdown, religious belief and practice are a major source of strength and recovery.
- ✓ Regular practice of religion is good for personal physical health: It increases longevity, improves one's chances of recovery from illness, and lessens the incidence of many killer diseases.

The overall impact of religious practice is illustrated dramatically in the three most comprehensive systematic reviews of the field.⁸ Some 81 percent of the studies showed the positive benefit of religious practice, 15 percent showed neutral effects, and only 4 percent showed harm.⁹ Each of these systematic reviews indicated more than 80 percent benefit, and none indicated more than 10 percent harm. Even this 10 percent may be explained by

Chart 2

Percent of U.S. Population That is Church-Affiliated



Source: "Religion in America Supplement '95" The Gallup Poll, Princeton Religion Research Center, Princeton, NJ., 1995.

- 8 For social scientists, a "systematic review" is one in which the robustness of the research method is weighted when assessing the quality of the findings reported. Thus, systematic reviews are the most useful way to assess the scientific literature and provide a valid guide to the findings in a particular field.
- 9 Jeff S. Levin and Harold Y. Vanderpool, "Is Frequent Religious Attendance Really Conducive to Better Health?: Towards an Epidemiology of Religion," *Social Science Medicine*, Vol. 24 (1987), pp. 589-600; David B. Larson, Kim A. Sherrill, John S. Lyons, Fred C. Craigie, S. B. Thielman, M. A. Greenwold, and Susan S. Larson, "Dimensions and Valences of Measures of Religious Commitment Found in the American Journal of Psychiatry and the Archives of General Psychiatry: 1978 through 1989," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 149 (1978), pp. 557-559; Fred C. Craigie, Jr., David B. Larson, and Ingrid Y. Liu, "References to Religion in The Journal of Family Practice: Dimensions and Valence of Spirituality," *The Journal of Family Practice*, Vol. 30 (1990), pp. 477-480.

more recent social science insights into “healthy religious practice” and “unhealthy religious practice.”¹⁰ This latter notion will be discussed later—it is seen generally by most Americans of religious faith as a mispractice of religion. Unfortunately, the effects of unhealthy religious practice are used to downplay the generally positive influence of religion.¹¹ This both distorts the true nature of religious belief and practice and causes many policymakers to ignore its positive social consequences.

Religious practice appears to have enormous potential for addressing today’s social problems. As summarized in 1991 by Allen Bergin, professor of psychology at Brigham Young University, considerable evidence indicates that religious involvement reduces “such problems as sexual permissiveness, teen pregnancy, suicide, drug abuse, alcoholism, and to some extent deviant and delinquent acts, and increases self esteem, family cohesiveness and general well being....Some religious influences have a modest impact whereas another portion seem like the mental equivalent of nuclear energy....More generally, social scientists are discovering the continuing power of religion to protect the family from the forces that would tear it down.”¹²

Professor Bergin’s summary was echoed two years later by nationally syndicated columnist William Raspberry: “Almost every commentator on the current scene bemoans the increase of violence, lowered ethical standards and loss of civility that mark American society. Is the decline of religious influence part of what is happening to us? Is it not just possible that anti-religious bias masquerading as religious neutrality is costing more than we have been willing to acknowledge?”¹³ Other reviews¹⁴ also list the positive effects of religious belief and practice in reducing such problems as suicide, substance abuse, divorce, and marital dissatisfaction. Such evidence indicates clearly that religious practice contributes significantly to the quality of American life.

Given this evidence,

Congress should:

- ☞ **Begin** a new national debate to help renew the role of religion in American life;
- ☞ **Ask** the General Accounting Office (GAO) to review the evidence on the beneficial effects of religious practice in the relevant social science literature and report its findings to a national commission formed to promote the consideration of religious practice among U.S. citizens;
- ☞ **Fund** federal experiments with school choice that include religiously affiliated schools;

10 See “Religion and the Social Sciences,” *infra*, on the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic religious practice.

11 Thomas Skill, James D. Robinson, John S. Lyons, and David Larson, “The Portrayal of Religion and Spirituality on Fictional Network Television,” *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (March 1994), pp. 251-267.

12 Allen E. Bergin, “Values and Religious Issues in Psychotherapy and Mental Health,” *The American Psychologist*, Vol. 46 (1991), pp. 394-403, esp. p. 401. Professor Bergin received the American Psychological Association’s top award in 1990.

13 William Raspberry: “Christmas Without Meaning? Must the Religious Make a Secret of Their Beliefs?” *The Washington Post*, December 24, 1993, p. A15.

14 David B. Larson, Susan S. Larson, and John Gartner, “Families, Relationships and Health,” in *Behavior and Medicine*, ed. Danny Wedding (Baltimore: Mosby Year Book Inc., 1990), pp. 135-147.

- ☞ **Pass** a sense-of-the-Congress resolution that data on religious practice are useful for policymakers and researchers as part of the public policy debate; and
- ☞ **Mandate** a census question on religious practice. It violates nobody's freedom of religion for Congress to know the level and intensity of religious practice in America.

The President should:

- ☞ **Appoint** judges who are more sensitive to the role of religion in public life, with the Senate ensuring that such is the case by ascertaining the stand of judges on matters of religion and its relationship to the Constitution;
- ☞ **Direct** the Bureau of the Census to record levels of religious practice in the census for the year 2000 (time is running out for preparation of the census questionnaire); and
- ☞ **Issue** a directive to all federal agencies making clear that cooperation between government entities and the social, medical, and educational services of faith-based organizations does not violate separation of church and state.

The U.S. Supreme Court should:

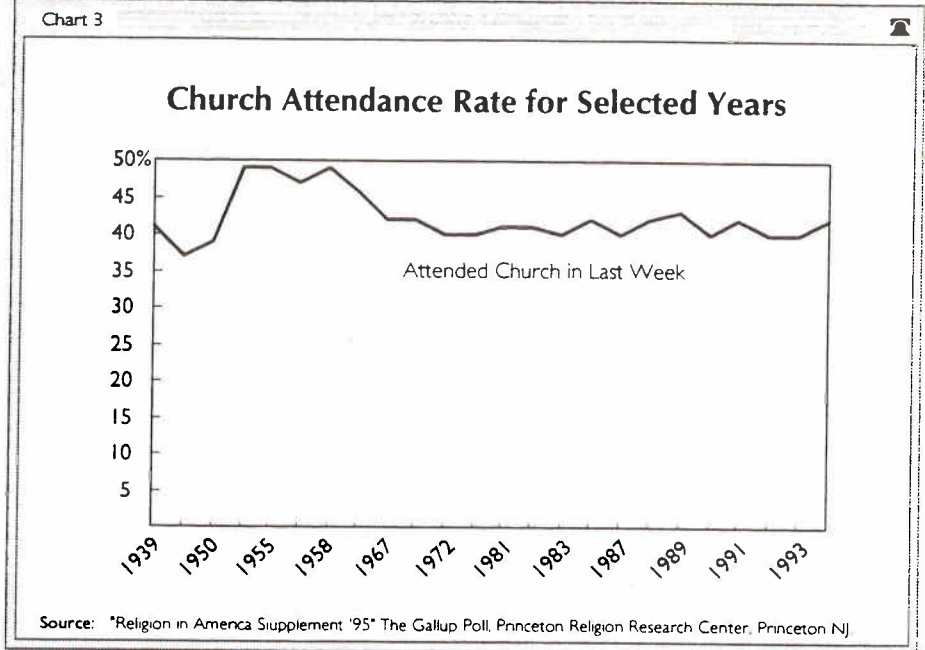
- ☞ **Review** the decisions in which it has changed the laws of the land by changing commonly held beliefs regarding the Constitution and religion and send to Congress those that should have been the object of legislative action rather than judicial reinterpretation.

America's religious leaders should:

- ☞ **Be much more assertive** in emphasizing the contribution of religion to the health of the nation and in resisting efforts to minimize religion in public discourse;
- ☞ **Make clear** to their congregations that they are contributing not only to their own welfare, but also to the well-being of the nation by their regular attendance at religious worship;
- ☞ **Take special care** of the religious formation of children, especially during the transition period from childhood to adolescence, when they are most likely to lose their religious faith;
- ☞ **Recognize** that the church in the inner city, especially the black church, has a vital role to play in helping its people escape from the degrading culture of inner-city poverty; and
- ☞ **Encourage** education leaders, social scientists, and social policy practitioners to rely more on religious belief and worship to achieve social policy and social work goals.

RELIGION AND HAPPINESS

Ever since Aristotle outlined the goal of a sound civil order in his *Politics*,¹⁵ social and political scientists and social psychologists have been particularly interested in what makes human beings happy. Happy people tend to be productive and law-abiding. They learn well, make good citizens, and are invariably pleasant company. It turns out that the practice of religion has a significant effect on happiness and an overall sense of personal well-being. Religious affiliation and regular church attendance are near the top of the list for most people in explaining their own happiness¹⁶ and serve as good predictors of who is most likely



to have this sense of well-being.¹⁷ Happiness is greater and psychological stress is lower for those who attend religious services regularly.¹⁸ Those pursuing a personal relationship with God tend to have improved relationships with themselves and with others.¹⁹

A large epidemiological study conducted by the University of California at Berkeley in 1971 found that the religiously committed had much less psychological distress than the uncommitted.²⁰ Rodney Stark, now of the University of Washington, found the same in a 1970 study: The higher the level of religious attendance, the less stress suffered when adversity had to be endured.²¹ Similarly, in a longitudinal study of 720 adults conducted by

- 15 *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), Book VIII, "Political Ideal and Educational Principles," Chapters 1, 2, and 3, "The Highest Goal," pp. 279-289.
- 16 B. Beit-Hallami, "Psychology of Religion 1880-1939: The Rise and Fall of a Psychological Movement," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 10 (1974), pp. 84-90.
- 17 Harsha N. Mookherjee, "Effects of Religiosity and Selected Variables on the Perception of Well-Being," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 134, No. 3 (June 1994), pp. 403-405, reporting on a national sample General Social Survey of 1,481 adults aged 18-89.
- 18 Larson and Larson, "The Forgotten Factor in Physical and Mental Health," p. 76.
- 19 David O. Moberg, "The Development of Social Indicators of Spiritual Well-Being for Quality of Life Research," in *Spiritual Well-Being: Sociological Perspectives*, ed. David O. Moberg (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979).
- 20 Rodney Stark, "Psychopathology and Religious Commitment," *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 12 (1971), pp. 165-176.
- 21 R. W. Williams, D. B. Larson, R. E. Buckler, R. C. Heckman, and C. M. Pyle, "Religion and Psychological Distress in a Community Sample," *Social Science Medicine*, Vol. 32 (1991), pp. 1257-1262.

David Williams of the University of Michigan, regular religious attendance led to much less psychological distress.²²

In 1991, David Larson, adjunct professor at the Northwestern and Duke University Schools of Medicine and president of the National Institute of Healthcare Research, completed a systematic review of studies on religious commitment and personal well-being. He found that the relationship is powerful and positive; overall, psychological functioning improved following a resumption of participation in religious worship for those who had stopped.²³

RELIGION AND FAMILY STABILITY

There is a growing consensus that America needs to pursue policies aimed at re-strengthening the family. The beneficial effects of religious worship on family stability clearly indicate one way to help accomplish this. Professors Darwin L. Thomas and Gwendolyn C. Henry of Brigham Young University's Department of Sociology sum up earlier research²⁴ on the quest by young people for meaning and love: "Research on love clearly indicates that for many, love in the social realm cannot clearly be separated from love that contains a vertical or a divine element.... Young people see love as the central aspect of the meaning of life; they believe that religion is still important in helping form judgments and attitudes."²⁵ Their conclusion: "Family and religious institutions need to be studied simultaneously in our efforts to understand the human condition better."²⁶

"Middletown," one of the century's classic sociological research projects, studied the lives of inhabitants of a typical American town, first in the 1920s and for the third time in the 1980s. Based on the latest round of follow-up research, Howard Bahr and Bruce Chadwick, professors of sociology at Brigham Young University, concluded in 1985 that "There is a relationship between family solidarity—family health if you will—and church affiliation and activity. Middletown [churchgoing] members were more likely to be married, remain married and to be highly satisfied with their marriages and to have more children.... The great divide between marriage status, marriage satisfaction and family size is... between those who identify with a church or denomination and those who do not."²⁷

Four years later, Professor Arland Thornton of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan likewise concluded from a Detroit study of the same relationship that "These data indicate strong intergenerational transmission of religious involvement. Attendance at religious services is also very stable within generations across time."²⁸

22 *Ibid.*

23 David B. Larson and Susan S. Larson, "Does Religious Commitment Make a Clinical Difference in Health?" *Second Opinion*, Vol. 17 (July 1991), pp. 26-40.

24 William V. D'Antonio: "The Family and Religion: Exploring a Changing Relationship," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 19 (1980), pp. 89-104.

25 Darwin L. Thomas and Gwendolyn C. Henry, "The Religion and Family Connection: Increasing Dialogue in the Social Sciences," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 47 (May 1985), pp. 369-370.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Howard M. Bahr and Bruce A. Chadwick, "Religion and Family in Middletown, USA," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 47 (May 1985), pp. 407-414.

