

Religious Practice and Educational Attainment

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September 2, 2010

Over the last decade, research on the effects of religious practice has expanded. It now encompasses such areas as health, overcoming addictions, reducing crime, and reforming criminals. Cover stories in popular magazines have brought some of this research to public notice.

For public policy, one of the most important potential effects of religious practice is educational attainment. Education is widely recognized as the way to maintain the well-being of those born into the middle class. It is also a powerful tool to raise individuals out of poverty. As a result, nations have developed long-term educational strategies as an integral part of their economic development. If religious practice were to have a significantly positive role in education, then the practice of religion would have profound implications for world economies and societies.

This review of the effect of religious practice on educational outcomes has two main sections. The first section examines the effects of religious practice on educational performance. The second categorizes the pathways by which religious practice achieves these effects. These pathways include the inner dynamics of the child (internal locus of control, expectations of oneself, discipline, habits, and work effort), the marital life of parents and the family life they build together (marital stability and family satisfaction, family income and parental expectations), church activities (worship in congregations, social networks gained, and extracurricular activities in church affiliated organizations), and such dynamics as ethnic religion for immigrants or the protectiveness that religion provides against risky behaviors that derail educational advancement.

Finally, this review examines some of the negative effects that certain types of religious practice can have on educational attainment. These effects often

manifest themselves in marginal areas or populations, and can be significantly negative.

I. The Direct Positive Impact of Religious Practice on Educational Achievement

For some time, a small but growing body of research has consistently indicated that the frequency of religious practice is directly and significantly correlated with academic outcomes and educational attainment.

A. Religion and Academic Performance

Several studies have shown that religiously involved students spend more time on their homework, work harder in school,¹ and achieve more as a result.²

Religious attendance, a key indicator of the role of religion in a person's life, is strongly associated with academic performance. Analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that increased religious attendance correlates with higher grades.³ In one study, students who attended religious activities weekly or more frequently were found to have a GPA 14.4 percent higher than students who never attended.⁴ Frequent religious attendance also correlates with lower dropout rates and greater school attachment.⁵ Looking specifically at math and reading scores, students who frequently attend religious services scored 2.32 points higher on tests in these subjects than their less religiously-involved peers.⁶ The author's dissertation found a very strong correlation as illustrated in the chart below (see Figure 1 below).

¹ Chandra Muller & Christopher G. Ellison, "Religious Involvement, Social Capital, and Adolescents' Academic Progress: Evidence from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988," *Sociological Focus* 34 (2001): 155-183.

² M. J. Donahue & P.L. Benson, "Religion and the Well-Being of Adolescents," *Journal of Social Issues*, 51 (1995): 145-160.

³ Mark D. Regnerus & Glen H. Elder, "Religion and Vulnerability Among Low-Risk Adolescents," *Social Science Research* 32 (2003): 633-58 (644, 650); J. L. Glanville, D. Sikkink, & E.I. Hernández, "Religious Involvement and Educational Outcomes: The Role of Social Capital and Extracurricular Participation," *Sociological Quarterly*, 49 (2008): 105-137.

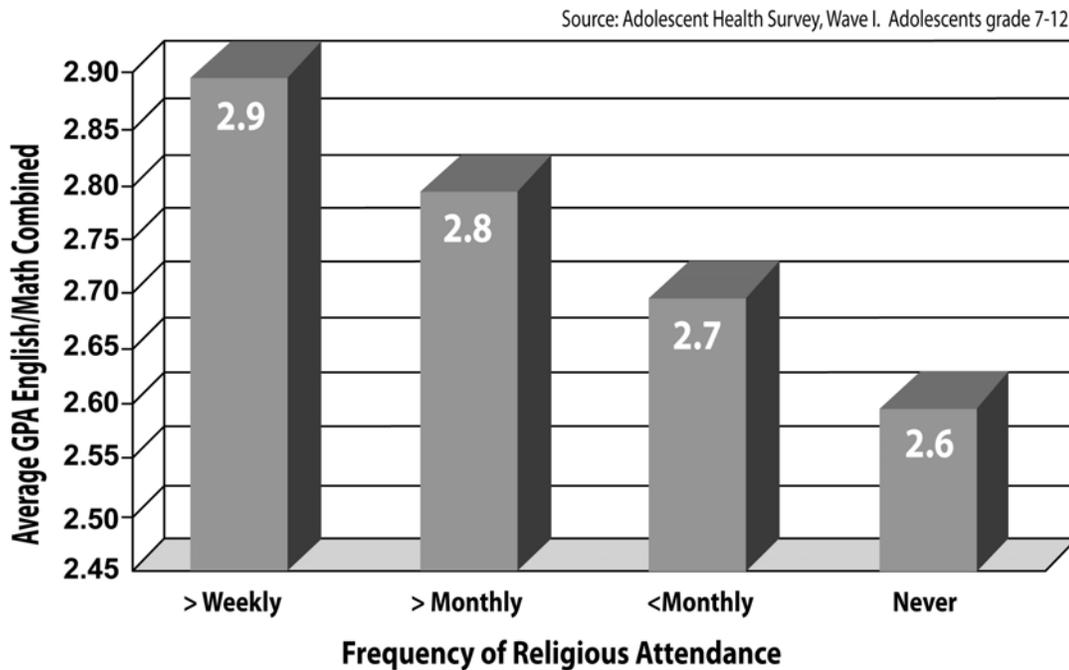
Regnerus and Elder analyzed 9,200 youth from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. They also found that each unit increase in church attendance decreased the likelihood of getting poor grades by 13 percent.

⁴ J. L. Glanville, D. Sikkink, & E. I. Hernández, "Religious Involvement and Educational Outcomes: The Role of Social Capital and Extracurricular Participation," *Sociological Quarterly* 49 (2008): 105-137.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mark D. Regnerus, "Shaping Schooling Success: Religious Socialization and Educational Outcomes in Metropolitan Public Schools," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2000): 363-70.

Figure 1 – “GPA English-Math Score”
by Religious Attendance



Parents’ religious attendance is also a significant indicator: one study found that Dutch students who held a strong “Christian worldview” and whose families attended religious services scored higher academically than those who did not report religious involvement.⁷

Social life that includes or is built around church functions (“religious socialization”) and children’s involvement in church activities are strong predictors of academic achievement as well. Children in Pentecostal families who have greater religious socialization also have increased levels of educational attainment, despite being at a lower socioeconomic level than peers in other denominations and having a generally lower educational attainment compared to the rest of the population.⁸ Furthermore, those who become more religiously involved during their high school years increase their academic ranking.⁹ A study

⁷ Annebert Dijkstra & Jules L. Peschar, “Religious Determinants of Academic Attainment in the Netherlands,” *Comparative Education Review*, Special Issue on Religion 40 (1996): 47-65 (62).

⁸ Diane R. Brown & Lawrence E. Gary, “Religious Socialization and Educational Attainment among African Americans: An Empirical Assessment,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 3 (1991): 411-26.

⁹ Glen H. Elder, Jr. & Rand D. Conger, *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 161. This “Children of the Land” panel study consisted of 451 two-parent families.

of Iowa families discovers that youth who in eighth grade are religiously involved will have higher academic competence in the twelfth grade.¹⁰

Another study of undergraduates at a small secular liberal arts college found a similar association between an increase in religious practice and an increase in academic standing among college-age students. More than 75 percent of students who become more religious during their college years achieve above-average college performance.¹¹

Frequent religious attendance also tends to increase students' total years of schooling. Students who attend church weekly while growing up have significantly more years of total schooling by their early thirties than peers who do not attend church at all. The benefits that students receive from weekly religious attendance are equivalent to the benefits that come from a mother that has three years of extra education and a father that has four years of extra education.¹²

Christian Smith, director of the National Study of Youth and Religion and Professor of Sociology at Notre Dame, drawing work done by Muller and Ellison¹³, and Regnerus,¹⁴ notes that the influence of church attendance and favorable perceptions of religion on "positive school attitudes" is evident from childhood, through late adolescence, and into college.¹⁵

B. Religion and the Educational Attainment of Disadvantaged Youth

Religious practice seems to benefit the education of the poor even more than it does that of advantaged children. An analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that church attendance strengthens educational progress among children in high-poverty neighborhoods.¹⁶ Mark Regnerus, Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, reports that church

¹⁰ Ibid., 158.

¹¹ David S. Zern, "Some Connections Between Increasing Religiousness and Academic Accomplishment in a College Population," *Adolescence* 24, no. 93 (1989): 152. This study's sample size was 251. Zern also found that neither past nor present religious practice was related to grade point average in college.

¹² L. D. Loury, "Does Church Attendance Really Increase Schooling?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43 (2004): 119–127.

¹³ Chandra Muller & Christopher Ellison, "Religious Involvement, Social Capital, and Adolescents' Academic Progress: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988," *Sociological Focus* 34 (2001): 155-83.

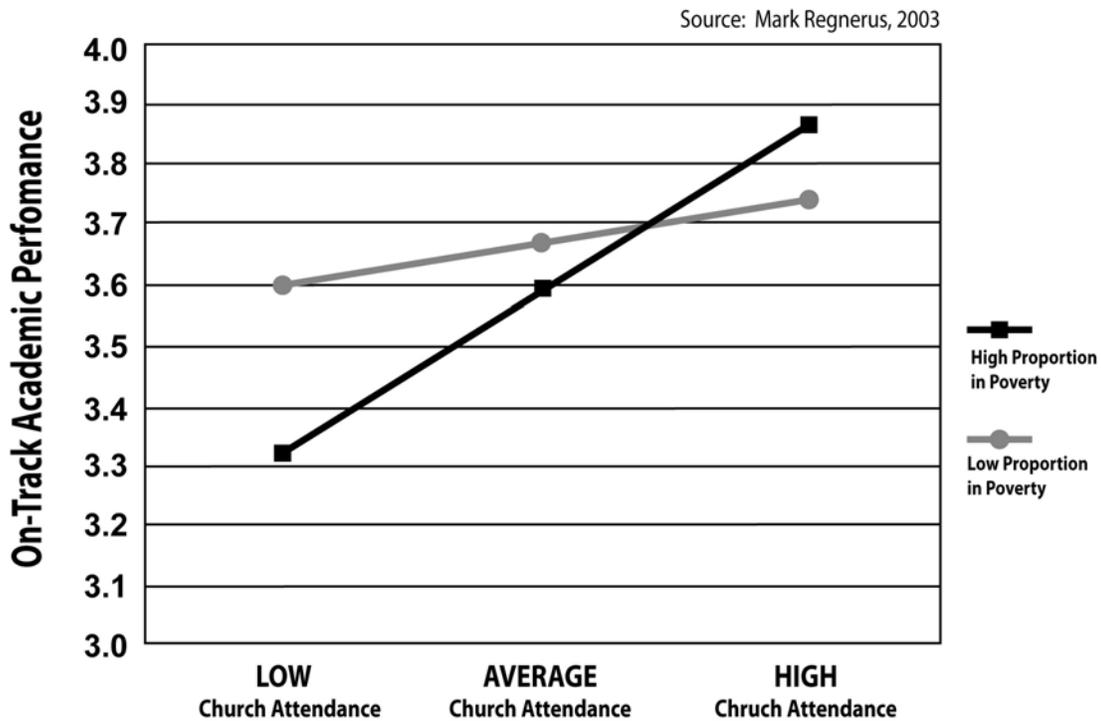
¹⁴ Mark Regnerus, "Shaping School Success: Religious Socialization and Educational Outcomes in Urban Public Schools," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39 (2000): 363-70.

¹⁵ Christian Smith, "Theorizing Religious Affects Among American Adolescents," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 no.1, 2003: 17-30

¹⁶ Mark D. Regnerus, *Making the Grade* (Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, 2002), 10.

attendance also has a more positive impact on the academic performance of youths in lower-income neighborhoods than on the performance of their peers in more affluent neighborhoods (see Figure 2 below).¹⁷

Figure 2 – “Interaction Between Church Attendance and Level of Neighborhood Poverty on Academic On-Track Performance”



Regnerus draws attention to the fact that religion for the advantaged is only one resource among many. By contrast, for the poor, the effect of religious practice is significant because it is one of the few robust positive influences in their lives.¹⁸

Regnerus also found that “[a]s the level of poverty rises within the neighborhood, the relationship between church attendance and being on-track in school becomes more positive, indicating a uniquely protective influence of church attendance among youth in more impoverished neighborhoods when compared with their devout counterparts in more prosperous neighborhoods (See Figure 3 below).”¹⁹

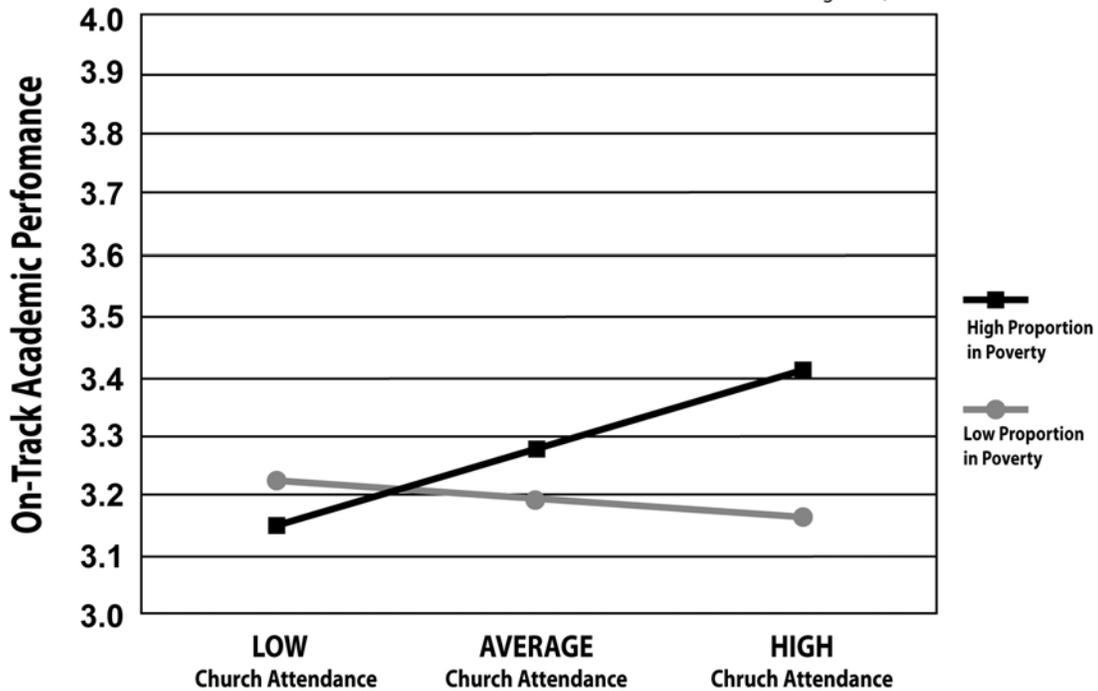
¹⁷ Mark D. Regnerus, “Staying on Track in School: Religious Influences in High- and Low-Risk Settings,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 4 (2003): 633-49 (646).

¹⁸ Regnerus, “Staying on Track in School,” 646.

¹⁹ Mark D. Regnerus, “Making the Grade,” *Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society* (2002):8.

Figure 3 – “Neighborhood Poverty and Academic On-Track Performance”
after controlling for Wave I On-track status

Source: Mark Regnerus, 2003



Other studies confirm religion’s beneficial effects on the academic performance of children in urban communities. William Jeynes, Professor of Education at California State University Long Beach, found that “very religious” high school adolescents from urban communities fared better academically than non-religious adolescents. Furthermore, religiosity has a greater impact on educational outcomes for urban youth than for non-urban youth.²⁰ One possible reason for this effect is that religious organizations are more accessible in urban areas. Religion also acts as a check against the distractions of urban neighborhoods that obstruct educational achievement.²¹

Spiritual and religious involvement affects educational outcomes more than income does. One analysis of tenth grade students found that, for both black and white students, the impact of pro-social values was stronger than the effect of socioeconomic status on reading and math proficiency (44 percent greater for

²⁰ William Jeynes, “The Effect of Religious Commitment on the Academic Achievement of Urban and Other Children,” *Education and Urban Society* 36, no. 44, (2003): (44-62) 50.

²¹ Ibid.

white students and 51 percent greater for black students).²² The study also showed that holding religious values was associated with higher math scores for black students.²³ According to another study, socialization within a religious context has a greater positive effect on the educational attainment of black youths than does either family structure or denominational affiliation.²⁴

Despite the small number of studies in this area, the findings are remarkably similar: all point to significant educational gains for disadvantaged youths who involve themselves in religious activities.

C. Religion and the High School Dropout Rate

Low frequency of religious attendance strongly correlates to a higher public school dropout rate. One study found that 19.5 percent of students who infrequently worshiped drop out of school, compared to only 9.1 percent of students who attended worship often.²⁵

Summary:

- Regular religious practice is repeatedly associated with higher educational performance and attainment.
- An increase in religious practice is associated with an increase in educational performance.
- Religious practice is especially beneficial for the poor.

II. How Religious Belief and Practice Affect Educational Performance

The beneficial effects of religious practice on education are transmitted to the individual student through various pathways within the family of origin and through peers, the church community, and the extended community.

A. Individual Pathways for the Influence of Religion

Values and Norms. Internalized values and norms have a significant impact on math and reading scores, both directly²⁶ and indirectly, through the effect that values have on other school-related activities such as homework, watching

²² Sandra L. Hanson & Alan L. Ginsburg, "Gaining Ground: Values and High School Success," *American Educational Research Journal* 25, no. 3 (1988): 334-65. Their study consisted of a national sample of 30,000 10th-grade students from the "High School and Beyond" surveys of 1980 and 1982.

²³ *Ibid.*, 360.

²⁴ Diane R. Brown & Lawrence E. Gary, "Religious Socialization and Educational Attainment among African Americans: An Empirical Assessment," *The Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 3 (1991): 411-26.

²⁵ James S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): S114.

²⁶ Hanson & Ginsburg, "Gaining Ground."

television, and reading.²⁷ Just as secular “personal morality” has a positive impact on school attendance,²⁸ so do “religious values,” which are among the variables that influence behaviors outside of school (such as watching television less, doing homework more, reading, and working for pay). All of these, in turn, affect high-school students’ achievement.²⁹

Locus of Control. Values also help form an internal locus of control. “Locus of control” is the presence of established habits of discipline and balance in matters of work and initiative. Sandra Hanson, Professor of Sociology at Catholic University of America, and Alan Ginsburg, Director of the Policy and Program Studies Service within the U.S. Department of Education, explain that “[a] high internal locus of control refers to the belief that one’s action and efforts, rather than fate or luck” shape the result of one’s efforts. This belief, in turn, is linked to “the effort that students put forth and the importance they assign to working hard.”³⁰

Religious practice increases adolescents’ sense of an internal locus of control. In a panel study of Iowa families, Glen Elder, Professor of Sociology and Psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Rand Conger, Professor of Psychology, Human Growth, and Family Studies at the University of California Davis, conclude that “[r]egular participation in church services and programs strengthened self-concepts of academic achievement, work habits, and discipline.”³¹ Mark Regnerus also found that, in addition to fostering stronger social bonds with family and community, a higher level of involvement in church activities is associated with “a level of social control and motivation toward education that leads to better math and reading skills.”³² Another study concludes that adolescents’ religious involvement is positively associated with a sense of control over their lives.³³

Expectations. Teens who are devoutly religious have higher educational expectations for themselves.³⁴ Among Vietnamese immigrants, frequent religious

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Robin D. Perrin, “American Religion in the Post-Aquarian Age: Values and Demographic Factors in Church Growth and Decline,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (1989): (75-89), 80.

²⁹ Hanson & Ginsburg, “Gaining Ground,” 349.

³⁰ Hanson & Ginsburg, “Gaining Ground,” 336.

³¹ Elder & Conger, *Children of the Land*, 158.

³² Regnerus, “Shaping Schooling Success,” 367; cf. Mavis Grovenia Sanders, “Breaking the Cycle of Reproduction: The Effect of Communities, Families, and Schools, on the Academic Achievement of Urban African American Youth,” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1995), 154.

³³ Muller & Ellison, “Religious Involvement, Social Capital, and Adolescents’ Academic Progress,” 167.

³⁴ Darnell, Alfred & Darren Sherkat, “The impact of Protestant Fundamentalism on Educational Attainment,” *American Sociological Review* 62 (1997): 306-316; Chandra Muller and Christopher G. Ellison, “Religious Involvement, Social Capital, and Adolescents’ Academic Progress: Evidence from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988,” *Sociological Focus* 34, no. 2 (2001):155-

attendance correlates to adolescents' placing a greater importance on attending college, earning good grades, and avoiding substance abuse.³⁵

The presence of those with religious beliefs has similar effects. Youth in schools where the majority are Jewish are 14 percent more likely to plan to attend college than counterparts in schools where Jewish students are a minority. This influence toward education is not diminished and indeed is even slightly increased when the normal controls for intelligence, mother's aspiration, occupation, and income are taken into account.³⁶ A study on Catholic identity showed outcomes similar to the result of the Jewish study, with regard to expectations for increased educational achievement.³⁷

Skills and Habits. Certain habits correlate with good school performance, such as attending school regularly and spending more time on homework. Religious practice helps form these habits, as an analysis of inner-city children who escape poverty illustrates: "Church-going invariably raises the amount of time a youth spends on productive activity [working, searching for work, traveling to work, school-going, housework, and reading]."³⁸

Another study showed that regular participation in church services and programs strengthens work habits and self-discipline.³⁹

Religious attendance also appears to boost social skills: Elder and Conger report from the Iowa longitudinal study that religiously-involved eighth grade students have greater social skills in the twelfth grade.⁴⁰ These studies all agree that religious practice (and all that comes with it) delivers highly valued habits and skills that enhance social life, study, and earnings.

Behavior. Religious attendance has a profound effect on children with behavioral risks. One study analyzed the characteristics of those who escape poverty and found that church attendance powerfully reduces socially deviant activity.⁴¹ Another showed that while religious practice has a positive protective

83; Mark D. Regnerus, "Shaping Schooling Success: Religious Socialization and Educational Outcomes in Metropolitan Public Schools," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2000): 363-70.

³⁵ Carl L. Bankston & Min Zhou, "The Ethnic Church, Ethnic Identification, and the Social Adjustment of Vietnamese Adolescents," *Review of Religious Research* 38, no. 1 (1996).

³⁶ A. Lewis Rhodes & Charles B. Nam, "The Religious Context of Educational Expectations," *American Sociological Review* 35, no. 2 (1970): (253-267), 263.

³⁷ Regnerus, "Shaping Schooling Success," 367.

³⁸ Richard B. Freeman, "Who Escapes? The Relation of Church-Going and Other Background Factors to the Socio-Economic Performance of Black Male Youths from Inner-City Poverty Tracts," NBER Working Paper, no. 1656 (1985): 11.

³⁹ Elder & Conger, *Children of the Land*, 158.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴¹ Freeman, "Who Escapes," 12.

influence across all income levels, it proves particularly effective in engendering educational resilience among at-risk youths.⁴²

Even among low-risk, middle-class adolescents, religious attendance has a significant effect on minimizing behavioral risks. One study found that adolescents who attended weekly religious services were less likely to use drugs or alcohol, to engage in delinquent behavior, to get in trouble at school or to have poor grades when compared with their peers who attended church less than monthly or not at all. Youth who considered religion to be fairly important or very important in their lives were less likely to engage in risky behavior.⁴³ For many of these youth, church attendance “reinforces messages about working hard and staying out of trouble, orients [youth] toward a positive future, and builds a transferable skill-set of commitments and routines.”⁴⁴

For youth from more advantaged homes and communities, it is the *importance* they place on religion which has the greater impact on positive behavioral outcomes, rather than church attendance alone. For advantaged students, a high “importance of religion” score reduces the likelihood of alcohol use, drug use, delinquency, and problem behaviors at school.⁴⁵

Summary:

- Regular religious attendance increases the internalization of traditional values and norms.
- Regular religious attendance strengthens a sense of internal locus of control and discipline.
- Regular religious attendance increases adolescents’ expectations of higher educational achievement for themselves.
- Religious practice is a positive force for staying on track at school.
- For at-risk youth, religious practice reduces socially deviant behavior.
- For advantaged middle class youth, religious practice is modestly protective for staying on track academically.
- For advantaged middle class youth, those who deem religion to be important are those who benefit most from its protective attributes.

B. Family as a Pathway for the Influence of Religion

The family helps to generate much of the individual human capital reviewed above by transferring values, developing a sense of autonomy and internal locus of control, and by passing on expectations that children will develop their talents

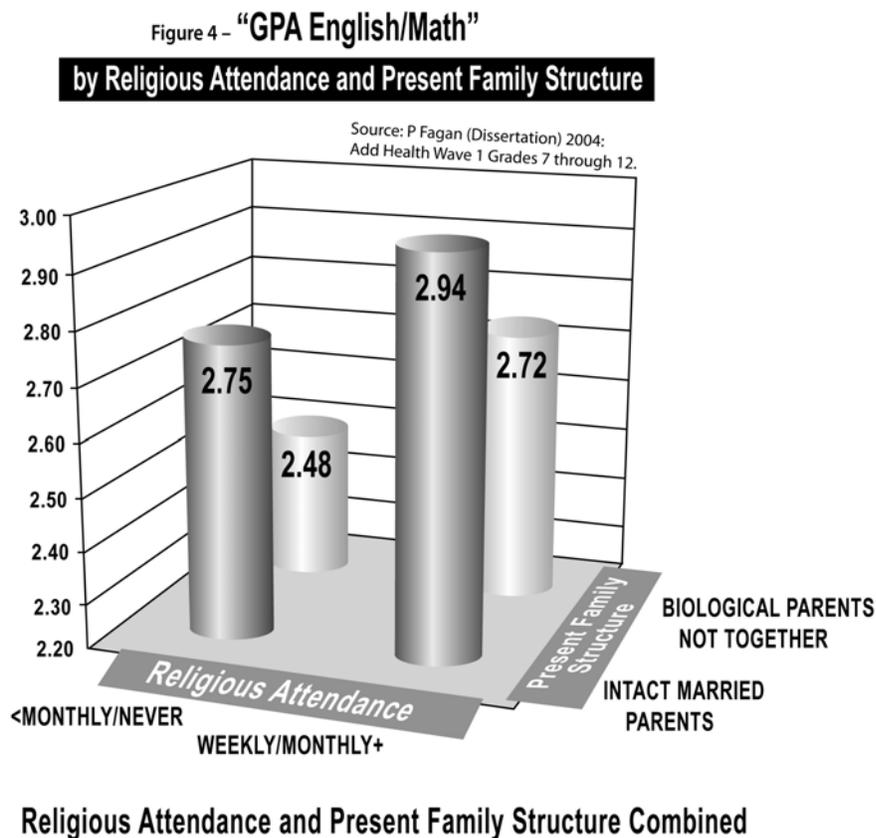
⁴² Regnerus, “Staying on Track in School,” 646.

⁴³ Mark D. Regnerus & Glen H. Elder, “Religion and Vulnerability among Low-Risk Adolescents,” *Social Science Research* 32 (2003): 644.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 643-646.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 650.

and habits.⁴⁶ Chandra Muller and Christopher Ellison, both Professors of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, found that the social capital obtained from family and community largely, though not entirely, explains the effect of religious practice on educational attainment.⁴⁷ Diane Brown, Professor of Health Education and Behavioral Science at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Lawrence Gary, Professor of Social Work at Howard University,⁴⁸ and Regnerus⁴⁹ found that religious socialization clearly corresponds to the educational attainment of younger blacks. These beneficial effects of religious practice on vulnerable youth increase still more when the at-risk children have grown up in two-parent families.⁵⁰ Within the religious family, parental cohesion adds to these benefits, while conflict diminishes them (see Figure 4 below).⁵¹



⁴⁶ Hanson & Ginsburg, “Gaining Ground,” 356.

⁴⁷ Muller & Ellison, “Religious Involvement, Social Capital, and Adolescents’ Academic Progress,” 167, 169.

⁴⁸ Brown & Gary, “Religious Socialization and Educational Attainment among African Americans,” 411-26.

⁴⁹ Regnerus, “Staying on Track in School,” (640).

⁵⁰ Mark D. Regnerus, “Religion and Positive Adolescent Outcomes: A Review of Research and Theory,” *Review of Religious Research*, 44, no. 4 (2003): 401.

⁵¹ Gene H. Brody, Zolinda Stoneman, & Douglas Flor, “Parental Religiosity, Family Processes, and Youth Competence in Rural, Two-Parent African American Families,” *Developmental Psychology* 32, no. 4 (1996): (696-706), 701.

Religion increases the family's human capital in other ways. For instance, religiously involved parents are more likely to plan successfully for the future and to structure their children's activities in ways that increase their children's likelihood of taking advanced math courses and graduating from high school.⁵² Another study showed that family cohesion, which religious practice increases, is associated with increased internal locus of control and academic competence among youth. Family cohesion also influenced the way youth dealt with problems.⁵³

A parent who is "intergenerationally altruistic"—that is, cares about the welfare of the child—will participate in religion to build up the requisite amount of human capital necessary for a child to become "skilled" (i.e., part of the non-manual labor market). Thus, the future of the child's education and income are a positive incentive for parents to attend religious activities. Incentive is diminished only if the parent is convinced that the child has no possibility of becoming "skilled," or if the child has no expressed desire to become "skilled."⁵⁴ Therefore, altruistic parents can and often will be religious, even if they have little personal incentive to be so, in order to transfer the social capital benefit of religion onto their children.

Parental Expectations. In their study of secular academic performance, Hanson and Ginsburg found that parental educational expectation was among the factors that have the strongest impact on adolescents' high-school outcomes.⁵⁵ Christian Smith, moreover, found that parents' church attendance increased the probability that their adolescent children knew more clearly what their parents expected and that their parents would be upset if they were sexually involved, used drugs, drank alcohol, got into fights, or skipped school.⁵⁶

Marriage of Parents. Marital stability is another form of human capital that advances educational attainment, while its opposite, divorce, hinders it.⁵⁷ Religious practice plays its part here also. Religious heterogamy (when the

⁵² Muller & Ellison, "Religious Involvement, Social Capital, and Adolescents' Academic Progress," 155-83.

⁵³ Brody, et al., "Parental Religiosity, Family Processes, and Youth Competence in Rural, Two-Parent African American Families," 701.

⁵⁴ C. Simon Fan, "Religious Participation and Children's Education: A Social Capital Approach," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 65 (2008): 304-309.

⁵⁵ Hanson & Ginsburg, "Gaining Ground," 356.

⁵⁶ Christian Smith, "Religious Participation and Parental Moral Expectations and Supervision of American Youth," *Reviews of Religious Research* 44, no. 4 (2003): (414-424), 418.

⁵⁷ Anguiano P. V. Ruben, "Families and Schools: The Effect of Parental Involvement on High School Completion," *Journal of Family Issues* 25, no. 1 (2004): 61-85; Timothy J. Biblarz & Greg Gottainer, "Family Structure and Children's Success: A Comparison of Widowed and Divorced Single-Mother Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62, (2000): 533-48.

spouses belong to different denominations) increases the likelihood of divorce,⁵⁸ while homogamy (when both spouses are members of the same denomination) increases the likelihood of marital stability and happiness.⁵⁹

Interestingly, Carmel Chiswick, Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago, found that “[p]eople with high levels of religious human capital tend to select spouses who also have high levels, forming family units for which the home production of religious education is more efficient.”⁶⁰ This phenomenon of high homogamy and practice seems to be operating in the American home-schooling movement.⁶¹ It also leads to less conflict and greater happiness for couples,⁶² as well as better relationships between children and parents.⁶³ In turn, this adds to family satisfaction, which has a larger effect than any of the religious variables in protecting against risky behaviors that undermine educational attainment.⁶⁴ Such indirect effects of religion, mediated through the parents, may be stronger than the direct effect of religion when practiced by the child.

Income. While income does not guarantee the realization of educational benefits for children, religious practice fosters stability within a family. Such stability increases the likelihood that children will enjoy these benefits. Educational attainment benefits from income,⁶⁵ and marriage increases the father’s income significantly.⁶⁶ Divorce generally leads to a significant decrease in income, and because religion stabilizes marriage, religion can be said to benefit children even more by preventing the costly consequences of divorce.⁶⁷

⁵⁸ Evelyn L. Lehrer, "Religion as a Determinant of Marital Fertility," *Journal of Population Economics*, 9 (2) (1996): 173-96.

⁵⁹ Tim B. Heaton & Edith L. Pratt, "The Effects of Religious Homogamy on Marital Satisfaction and Stability," *Journal of Family Issues* 11(1990): 191-207; Evelyn L. Lehrer & Carmel U. Chiswick, "Religion as a Determinant of Marital Stability," *Demography* 30, no. 3 (1993): 385-404.

⁶⁰ Carmel U. Chiswick, "An Economic Perspective on Religious Education: Complements and Substitutes in a Human Capital Portfolio" (Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA) DP no. 1456, January 2005): 14.

⁶¹ Lawrence M. Rudner, "Achievement and Demographics of Home School Students: 1998," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 7, no. 8 (1999):1-33.

⁶² V.R.A. Call & T.B. Heaton, "Religious Influence on Marital Stability," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, (1997): 382-92.

⁶³ Elder & Conger, *Children of the Land*, 161.

⁶⁴ Regnerus & Elder, "Religion and Vulnerability."

⁶⁵ R. Haveman & B. Wolfe, "The Determinants of Children’s Attainments: A Review of Methods and Findings," *Journal of Economic Literature* 33, no. 4 (1995): 1829-78.

⁶⁶ Kate Antonovics & Robert Town, "Are All the Good Men Married? Uncovering the Sources of the Marital Wage Premium," *American Economic Review* 94, no. 2 (2004): 317-321

⁶⁷ Larry Bumpass & Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in cohabitation and implications for children’s family contexts in the United States," *Population Studies* 54 (2000): 29-41; David B. Larson, Susan S. Larson, & John Gartner, "Families, Relationships and Health," in Danny Wedding, ed., *Behavior and Medicine* (St. Louis: Mosby Year Book, Inc., 1990), pp. 135-147.

C. Peers as a Pathway for the Influence of Religion

Good friendships, peer networks, and youth associations that help adolescents live more fully engaged lives, while discouraging risky behavior, may have a positive effect on educational outcomes. Though the area of peer relationships has received some attention throughout the past 50 years, most research has focused on dysfunctional behaviors and behavioral interventions. The social science understanding of the operations and dynamics of positive friendships are limited.⁶⁸ Within the limited body of research available, however, there are indications that networks of religious peers yield positive benefits. One study showed that a student's values, as well as peers' values, can have positive effects on out-of-school behaviors.⁶⁹ Another study reported that peers' values mediate, in part, the positive effect of religious involvement on teens' educational expectations.⁷⁰ Elder and Conger also demonstrated that religious values influence youths' perception of their friends and that, even at this stage of their lives, they develop future marriage plans in light of their religious beliefs.⁷¹ Another study discovers that youth participation in religious activities promotes friendships that "aid and encourage academic achievement and engagement."⁷²

Religious participation also increases intergenerational closure, a term that describes an adolescent's affinity for his parents and his parents' friends. Intergenerational closure, then, encourages role modeling and mentorship, within both the parent-child relationship and relationships with other adults. Religion provides a pathway for children to interact constructively with both their peers and their superiors, which generally encourages improved academic performance.⁷³

D. The Church Community as a Pathway for the Influence of Religion

The community of church members, like the family, plays its part in advancing educational attainment. The strong social bonds of religious groups can supplement the resources available to children, especially those in large families,

⁶⁸ T.J. Dishion, "Cross-Setting Consistency in Early Adolescent Psychopathology: Deviant Friendships and Problem Behavior Sequelae," *Journal of Personality* 68, no. 6 (2000): 1109-1126; T.J. Dishion, David W. Andrews & Lynn Crosby, "Antisocial Boys and Their Friends in Early Adolescence: Relationship Characteristics, Quality, and Interactional Process," *Journal of Child Development* 66 (1) (1995): 139-151.

⁶⁹ Hanson & Ginsburg, "Gaining Ground," 356.

⁷⁰ Muller & Ellison, "Religious Involvement," 169.

⁷¹ Elder & Conger, *Children of the Land*, 158.

⁷² J. L. Glanville, D. Sikkink & Hernández, E. I., "Religious Involvement and Educational Outcomes: The Role of Social Capital and Extracurricular Participation," *Sociological Quarterly* 49 (2008): (105-137), 122.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 105-137.

helping them to achieve higher levels of education.⁷⁴ Participation in church activities benefits children in all neighborhoods of different income-levels, though it particularly benefits children in low-income neighborhoods.⁷⁵ Interviews with black college students found that their religious communities fostered academic success by providing role models and mentors.⁷⁶

Elder and Conger provide a detailed account of the effect of the church community on adolescents' attitudes, expectations, and academic achievement:

Surrounded by adults and peers who care about worthy accomplishments, religiously-involved youth tend to score higher than other adolescents on school achievement, social success, confidence in self, and [parents' report of their] personal maturity (p.161)... Regular participation in church services and programs strengthened self-concepts of academic achievement, work habits, or discipline... Within the church, young people found guidance and encouragement from congregation members with whom they established strong ties (p. 158).

When they asked the high school freshmen they surveyed to estimate how their peer groups would rank five activities—athletics, school activities, working hard to get good grades, community activities, and church activities—adolescents who were not involved in the church and youth group were most likely to rank athletics first and school activities second.⁷⁷ In contrast, religiously-involved students gave a higher rank to both education and church activities.⁷⁸

Being anchored in a religious community promotes positive relationships among adolescents. One study found that the greater a high school student's engagement in church activities, the stronger his or her peer competence.⁷⁹ Similarly, high school seniors who perform well academically and socially are more likely to have had greater exposure to the disciplines and objectives of the church and the church youth group, and to associate with peers who share those values.⁸⁰

For immigrant youth and other ethnic groups, the church or synagogue is often the preferred place to study the language of their heritage and their community.

⁷⁴ R. Wuthnow, "Mobilizing Civic Engagement: The Changing Impact of Religious Involvement," in *Civic Engagement in American democracy*, ed. T. Skocpol and M. Fiorina (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 331-66.

⁷⁵ Regnerus, "Shaping Schooling Success," 367.

⁷⁶ Cheron Byfield, "The Impact of Religion on the Educational Achievement of Black Boys: A UK and USA Study," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29, no. 2 (2008): 189-199.

⁷⁷ Elder & Conger, *Children of the Land*.

⁷⁸ Regnerus, "Shaping Schooling Success," 367.

⁷⁹ Valarie King, Glen H. Elder, Jr., & Les B. Whitbeck, "Religious Involvement Among Rural Youth: An Ecological and Life-Course Perspective," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 7, no. 4 (1997): (431-456), 447.

⁸⁰ Elder & Conger, *Children of the Land*, 159.

This simultaneously contributes to the formation of a cultural and a religious identity and, as a result, increases the likelihood of educational achievement.

In their study of Vietnamese immigrant youth, Carl Bankston, Professor of Sociology at Tulane University, and Min Zhou, Professor of Sociology and Asian American Studies at the University of California Los Angeles, found that, while church attendance and parents' membership in a church correlated to higher grade point averages, church-sponsored programs in language and culture mediated part of the benefit. Rather than impeding the upward mobility of youth, these activities correlated strongly and positively to adolescents' academic performance. Bankston and Zhou explain this dynamic:

Ethnic religious participation ... promotes adjustment to the host society, precisely because it promotes the cultivation of a distinctive ethnicity, and membership in this distinctive ethnic group helps young people reach higher levels of academic achievement and avoid dangerous and destructive forms of behavior.⁸¹

Somewhat related to the community and culture effect is Jonathan Gruber's finding that residing in an area where the demographic majority reflects one's religious tradition is associated with significantly greater religious involvement and with better outcomes with regard to education, income, and marital status.⁸²

E. Religious Schools as Pathways for the Influence of Religion

Attendance at religious schools influences educational performance and attainment. Worthy of its own in-depth review, a significant literature exists detailing the strength of Catholic education in advancing the academic achievement of its pupils.⁸³ One study described the supportive network of such parochial and private schools as equivalent to a "social neighborhood" that reduces youths' risks and promotes academic achievement.⁸⁴ Throughout a large body of literature investigating the comparative educational effectiveness of religious and secular schools, findings such as the following are typical: "Roman Catholic students in Catholic-controlled schools are more likely to plan for college

⁸¹ Bankston & Zhou, "The Ethnic Church, Ethnic Identification, and the Social Adjustment of Vietnamese Adolescents," 29-31.

⁸² Jonathan Gruber, "Religious Market Structure, Religious Participation and Outcomes: Is Religion Good for You?" (NBER Working Paper, no. 11377, May 2005).

⁸³ Mavis Grovenia Sanders, "Breaking the Cycle of Reproduction: The Effect of Communities, Families, and Schools, on the Academic Achievement of Urban African American Youth," PhD diss., Stanford University, 1995 (154); Coleman, J.S. & T. Hoffer, "Public and Private Schools: The Impact of Communities," New York: Basic Books, 1987.

⁸⁴ Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. et al., "Looking Ahead: Patterns of Success in Late Adolescence," in *Managing to Make It: Urban Families and Adolescent Success* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 222.

than Catholic pupils in public schools—even if Catholics are in the majority at the public school.”⁸⁵

In addition, religious schooling has a positive long-term impact on adolescents’ religiosity, especially in high school, and especially if students receive a considerable amount of classroom instruction in religion.⁸⁶ Low-income students in schools that “stress academics and religion, possess high student morale, and encourage the centrality of religion and the development of community of faith” tend to be more committed to their faith and church than their counterparts in schools that do not have such emphases.⁸⁷

F. Extracurricular Activities as Pathways for the Influence of Religion

Structured after-school activities, including religious activities, are also associated with better educational outcomes. In an analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, student participation in structured activities, religious activities, and activities with adults during tenth grade had a significant positive impact on educational outcomes when those students were in the twelfth grade.⁸⁸ Participation in extracurricular activities produces a greater increase in youths’ educational expectations than participation in church activities does, although both types of activities have a significant positive impact.⁸⁹ Conversely, students who spend more unstructured time (e.g., hanging out with peers) are at greater risk of performing poorly in school.⁹⁰

Extracurricular church activities help youth reduce those problem behaviors that were putting their academic attainment at risk. The benefits of extracurricular church activities are dramatically demonstrated by one study which found that youths who were highly involved in church-sponsored organizations outside of school had a low level of problem behaviors. While their academic and psychological competence scores were lower than those of peers categorized as

⁸⁵ A. Lewis Rhodes & Charles B. Nam, “The Religious Context of Educational Expectations,” *American Sociological Review* 35, no. 2 (1970): (253-267), 264.

⁸⁶ B. Spilka, R.W. Hood Jr., & R. L. Gorsuch, “The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach,” (1985), Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

⁸⁷ Peter L. Benson, Michael J. Donahue, & Joseph A. Erickson, “Adolescence and Religion: A Review of the Literature from 1970 to 1986,” *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 1 (1989): (153-181), 167.

⁸⁸ W. J. Jordan & S.M. Nettles, “How students invest their time outside of school: Effects on school-related outcomes,” *Social Psychology of Education* 3 (2000): 217-243.

⁸⁹ Regnerus, “Shaping Schooling Success,” 363-70.

⁹⁰ Meredith Cosden, Gale Morrison, Lisa Gutierrez & Megan Brown, “The Effects of Homework Programs and After-School Activities on School Success,” *Theory Into Practice* 43, no. 3 (2004): 220-226.

“academically competent,” their engagement level in extracurricular activities and community programs distinguished them positively from their peers.⁹¹

A study of high school seniors in the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study showed that positive perceptions of religion and frequent attendance at religious activities were related to the following: a) positive parental involvement, b) positive perceptions of the future, c) positive attitudes toward academics, d) less frequent drug use, e) less delinquent behavior, f) fewer school attendance problems, g) more time spent on homework, h) more frequent volunteer work, i) recognition for good grades, and j) more time spent on extracurricular activities.⁹²

Summary:

- Religious parents are more likely to aid their children’s education by giving them access to a religious community; by giving them greater family stability, and thereby greater family income and family satisfaction; and by having higher educational expectations of them.
- Other pathways through which religious practice indirectly but positively influences educational outcomes include peers, church community, religious schools, and extracurricular activities.

III. Findings on Some Negative Impacts of Certain Types of Religious Practice

Throughout the literature, some findings indicate certain religious attitudes and practices can detract from educational achievement.

Kraig Beyerlein, Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, details the effects of different religious affiliation and found that Jews, by far, attain the most education.⁹³

Within conservative Protestantism, according to Beyerlein’s study, there are varied outcomes. Fundamentalists have, in general, the lowest educational attainment. Evangelicals are twice as likely to earn a college degree as fundamentalists and three times as likely as Pentecostals.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Frank F. Furstenberg , Jr. et al., “How They Fared: Measuring Adolescent Success,” in *Managing to Make It: Urban Families and Adolescent Success* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 62.

⁹² Jerry Trusty & Richard E. Watts, “Relationship of High School Seniors’ Religious Perceptions and Behavior to Educational, Career, and Leisure Variables,” *Counseling and Values* 44, no. 1 (1999): 30-40.

⁹³ Kraig Beyerlein, “Specifying the Impact of Conservative Protestantism on Educational Attainment,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 4 (2004): 505-518

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Alfred Darnell, Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Washington University in St. Louis, and Darren Sherkat, Professor of Sociology at Southern Illinois University, found that belief in Biblical inerrancy has a significant negative effect on educational attainment overall, while also limiting the college preparatory courses taken in high school. From their twenty-year longitudinal panel study, they also learned that educational aspirations and college completion are significantly lower for fundamentalists. However, non-fundamentalist children of fundamentalist parents do better than their fundamentalist siblings.⁹⁵ Other researchers showed similar results leading to similar conclusions.⁹⁶

Part of the fundamentalist reluctance to encourage the pursuit of higher levels of education may lie in religious leaders' experience that increased education frequently weakens religious belief and practice. This experience is confirmed by social science: Sherkat and Ellison found that educational attainment increased the likelihood of breaking ties with religious organizations. Those individuals who exceed the educational attainment of their religious peers were likely to leave their faith or switch denominations. Additionally, Sherkat and Ellison found that higher education lowered the likelihood of holding onto traditional religious beliefs.⁹⁷ Another study confirmed that higher levels of education tend to erode the strength of religious convictions.⁹⁸

On the basis of utility theory, C. Simon Fan, Professor of Economics at Lingnan University, found that individuals with higher education and income (measures of human capital) tend to have little need for the social capital that religion confers; thus, their utility for religion is zero or negative (i.e., their opportunity cost for religious activity equals or exceeds the social capital benefit of religious participation). Therefore, according to Fan, as human capital increases, participation in religion should decrease,⁹⁹ at least for those whose practice is based on utility motivations.

⁹⁵ Alfred Darnell & Darren F. Sherkat, "The Impact of Protestant Fundamentalism on Educational Attainment," *American Sociological Review* 62 (1997): 306-315.

⁹⁶ Darren E. Sherkat & Christopher E. Ellison, "Recent Developments and Current Controversies in the Sociology of Religion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 363-94; Ronald Burton, Stephen Johnson, & Joseph Tamney, "Education and Fundamentalism," *Review of Religious Research* 30, no. 4 (1989): 344-359; El Lehrer, "Religion as a Determinant of Educational Attainment: An Economic Perspective," *Social Science Review* 28 (1999): 358-79.

⁹⁷ Sherkat & Ellison, "Recent Developments and Current Controversies in the Sociology of Religion," 363-94.

⁹⁸ Daniel Carson Johnson, "Formal Education vs. Religious Belief: Soliciting New Evidence with Multinomial Logit Modeling," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 2 (1997): (231-46), 242.

⁹⁹ C. Simon Fan, "Religious participation and children's education: A social capital approach," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 65 (2008): (303-317), 312.

Summary:

- Fundamentalist practice, overall, is associated with the least educational attainment, while Jewish background is associated with the highest.
- Greater educational attainment seems to lessen ties to religious practice and to weaken religious convictions.

IV. Future Research

Myriad questions indicate the need for future research on the relationship between religious belief and practice and high levels of educational attainment. Future efforts might focus on eliminating imprecision in terminology, thereby allowing certain variables, their significance heretofore unacknowledged in studies on the effects of religion, to emerge. Scholars could significantly advance research on the effects of religion-generated human capital if the nomenclature and the measurement of independent religious variables were made more distinct, particularly moving beyond the term “attendance at religious activities” and refining it to its likely subcomponents of worship or communal prayer, doctrinal instruction classes, and non-religious extracurricular activities sponsored by religious institutions.

After such improvements are in place, more research is needed in the following areas:

- Replicating Regnerus’s key finding that the poorer the neighborhood in which the family resides, the greater the effect of religious attendance on educational performance;
- Replicating the finding that an increase in religious practice leads to an increase in educational performance, both in high school and in college;
- Replicating the finding that for middle-class advantaged youth, it is the importance they place on religion that yields for them the benefits of religious practice;
- Exploring more the effect of religious practice on the monitoring behavior of parents;
- Detailing the effects on educational performance of adolescent friendships grounded in a common religious identity;
- Identifying the pathways by which increased education does and does not undermine religious beliefs and practices for those who remain strong in their faith;
- Exploring if and how the benefits of increased religious practice influence educational attainment for practitioners other than Christians and Jews, including Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and others; and
- Exploring whether there is a difference in educational attainment by frequency of religious practice among Jews or whether that difference holds only for Christians.

Congress should obtain better information on the frequency of religious practice and importance placed on religious belief from existing, periodic national federal surveys. With this data available, people can more clearly see the association between religion and societal well-being. Some key candidates include three surveys administered by the Census Bureau, one by the Bureau of Labor Statistics:

- Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (Census),
- The American Community Survey (Census),
- The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) (Census), and
- The American Time Use Survey (Labor).

Government officials should include in these surveys a measure of respondents' religious devotion. This would permit an analysis of the effect of religious worship on the myriad aspects of national life that are studied using baseline information provided by such surveys.

A first bridge between two large bodies of literature (that reviewed above on the direct and indirect effect of religious practice on educational attainment and the literature on the comparative educational attainment by denomination) might well be a study of the Jewish family. Comparative research consistently indicates that Jews tend to have superior outcomes in both education and income, and even a cursory knowledge of Jewish culture in the West indicates that it encourages many, if not all, of the forms of human capital discussed above.

A detailed research project regarding the pathways involved in Jewish educational formation should yield important findings. Such a study would examine in detail the individual, marital, parental, family, community, and regional Jewish life to gain a clearer appreciation of the types of human capital they harness to yield their superior outcomes. For example, research could study the effect that teaching the language of their tradition has in forming a religious identity, while simultaneously yielding educational benefits. Such findings regarding family and community life among Jews could apply to other religious groups and would add to the general knowledge of the effective transmission of cultural strengths.

Finally, researchers need to delineate more fully the operation of the intermediate pathways. Since the paths of transmitting self-control and other strengths tend to be regarded as "old fashioned," there is a frequent tendency to diminish, change, disrupt, or move away from those pathways, despite the good they deliver. The more these are understood, the more they can be protected. Religious and educational leaders surely do not want to run the risk that any institutional policies might undermine such a source of strength.

V. Conclusion

This paper has presented a review of the literature on religious practice and its associated educational outcomes. Many of the individual impacts are small, but taken together they amount to a significant effect on educational attainment. Overall, religious practice boosts educational performance and attainment, especially for low-income individuals.

Regular religious attendance can increase the internalization of moral norms and values, strengthen an “internal locus of control” and habits of discipline, and increase adolescents’ expectations of themselves.

Religious practice, by stabilizing parental marriage and by making family life happier, increases levels of educational attainment. On the other hand, conflict resulting from marital heterogamy may decrease both the stability of marriage and perhaps the level of educational attainment of children. Close ties within congregations expose children to positive models that forge paths to success, especially for disadvantaged youth.

For inner-city youth, religious attendance may provide powerful protection against delinquent behavior and thus aid in educational attainment. For the poor, church congregations are one of the few forms of human capital available to them and thus are especially advantageous for them. For advantaged middle class youth, religious congregations are one among many viable social institutions of which they can avail themselves. To benefit from religious practice as much as their disadvantaged counterparts, advantaged youth must value religious practice highly, or it makes little to no difference in improving their educational attainment. Especially during the high school years, religious schooling increases long-term religious adherence.

When scholars more fully study these different impacts of religion, they may find that the combined, subtle, multifaceted, deeply embedded nature of the religious influence on human development is quite substantial.

Religious practice has a wide-ranging capacity to boost the academic potential of young people, especially for those who need it most. Though religious practice must be engaged in voluntarily in order for it to produce effective educational results, those entrusted with the public welfare have an interest in protecting and promoting it, if only because of its utility to society at large, as illustrated here in its impact on education.