

Religious Observance

Marriage and Family



A person's behaviour may be greatly influenced by his or her religious convictions. Religious convictions may be displayed in different ways, such as attendance at religious services, prayer, meditation or reading of religious scriptures, all of which may be indicators of the importance of religion in a person's life. For many, regular attendance at religious services may be a reflection of a deep religious commitment and belief. Religious devotion, or the lack of it, has been associated with marital stability, family size, and premarital sex.

by Warren Clark

Religion can be viewed as a system of thought, feeling, and action shared by a group that gives members an object of devotion; a code of ethics governing personal and social conduct; and a frame of reference relating individuals to their group and the universe.¹ Most major religions teach compassion and helpfulness, and research has shown that religious attendance is associated with positive social behaviour.² Also, those who attend religious services more frequently are more likely to state that they have spiritual needs.³ This may indicate that frequent attenders at religious services attach more importance to finding purpose and meaning in life than those who do not.

Using attendance at religious services as a proxy for religious conviction, this article examines the influence of religiosity on the attitudes of Canadians toward children, marriage and family relationships, and upon overall well-being, health and marital behaviour.

Religion plays an important role in the formation of attitudes to marriage and subsequent marital behaviour. For example, acceptance of biblical teachings about the sanctity of marriage and prohibitions against adultery may act as a barrier against divorce by reducing the likelihood of infidelity.⁴ The 1995 General Social Survey (GSS) found that the most common reasons why someone might decide to pursue a divorce were abusive behaviour, unfaithfulness, lack of love and respect, and a partner who drinks too much.⁵ While religious people were just as unwilling as those who never attended religious services to forgive a spouse's abusive or unfaithful behaviour, they were less likely to view lack of love and respect, and a partner's drinking too much as grounds for divorce. Religious couples were also more likely to state that they would stay married for the sake of their children.

Weekly attenders place more importance on home life The 1995 GSS asked Canadians to rate several areas of life in terms of their importance to the

¹ The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia 1995.

² Beutel 1995, pp. 438-439.

³ Bibby 1995, p.135.

⁴ Call 1997, p. 383.

⁵ Frederick 1998, pp. 7-8.

CANADIAN SOCIAL TRENDS BACKGROUNDER



What you should know about this study

Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) collects data from a sample of approximately 10,000 Canadians aged 15 and over living in private households in the ten provinces. Since 1985, two religion questions have been asked on each survey: one concerning religious affiliation, and the other, attendance at religious services or meetings. Religiosity (religious commitment), as measured by attendance at religious services, may vary substantially from time to time. This article relates attendance at religious services at the time respondents were interviewed; religious commitment at the time of an event (e.g., marriage breakdown) may have been quite different than it was at the time the respondent was interviewed.

Throughout this article, the terms "religious people" and "weekly attenders" are used to indicate adults who attend religious services every week.

Religious people more likely to want to keep the family together



Valid reasons for divorce	Attends religious services weekly	Never attends religious services
	%	
Abusive behaviour	92	96
Unfaithful behaviour	86*	88*
Lack of love and respect	76	92
Partner drinks too much	68	75
Would remain married for the sake of the children	57	36

* Difference not statistically significant.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1995 General Social Survey.

Religious people tend to place greater importance on marriage, family and children



	Average score	
	Attends religious services weekly	Never attends religious services
Importance to happiness of... (0=not at all important, 3=very important)		
• a lasting relationship	2.60*	2.45*
• being married	2.35	1.80
• having at least one child	2.27	1.95
• being able to have a paying job	1.89	2.10
Agreement with following statement (0=strongly disagree, 4=strongly agree)		
• Employed mothers can establish just as warm a relationship with their children as mothers who do not work for pay	2.26	2.54
• Keeping house is just as fulfilling as working for pay	2.60	2.28
• A job is alright but what women really want is a home and children	2.32	1.94
• A pre-school child is likely to suffer if both parents are employed	2.54	2.22
• Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person	2.03	2.28
• If a man brings enough money home so his wife and children have a comfortable life, he has fulfilled his role as a husband and a parent	1.62	1.36
• A man should refuse a promotion at work if it means spending too little time with his family	2.24	2.01
• A woman should refuse a promotion at work if it means spending too little time with her family	2.30	2.05
• Both the man and woman should contribute to the household income	2.56*	2.73*
• Having a family is alright, but what most men really want is to be successful in their job	2.13*	2.09*
• A man does not have to be very involved in sharing the everyday tasks of raising children; this is not primarily a man's responsibility	0.91*	0.81*

* Difference not statistically significant.

Note: Some of the differences between weekly attenders and those who never attended during 1995 is accounted for by age differences between the two groups. Young people have different values than older people; also young people are less likely to attend religious services on a weekly basis. Even after accounting for age differences between the two groups, all differences remained statistically significant except for those marked.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1995 General Social Survey.



respondent's happiness. On a scale from 0 to 3, 0 indicated the issue was not at all important, while 3 meant it was very important to their happiness.

Weekly attenders of religious services — both men and women — placed greater importance on lasting relationships, being married, and having at least one child than those who did not attend. Regardless of how often men attended religious services, they placed almost equal importance on being able to have a paying job. In contrast, women who attended weekly services believed a paying job was less important (1.59) than women who never attended (1.93). These views were common to all weekly attenders, regardless of their age.

Individuals were also asked to rate their agreement with certain statements relating to attitudes toward work and family. The scale ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Weekly attenders of both sexes agreed more strongly with statements supporting family and the nurturing role of women than those who never attended. "Keeping house is just as fulfilling as working for pay" was the statement with which weekly attenders agreed most strongly.

Although they showed less agreement with the statement that "a job is alright but what women really want is a home and children", their opinion on this statement contrasted more starkly with non-attenders than on any other issue.

On other issues, weekly attenders' and non-attenders' attitudes were very similar. In fact, there was no real difference in their belief that men and women should contribute to the household income and the statement that men should share in the raising of children.

Religious people feel better Studies have found links between religion and mental health suggesting that people who regularly attend religious services have a more optimistic view of life than those who never attend. According to these studies, religious people are less likely than others to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce or be unhappily married, and to commit suicide. Religiously active people may even tend to be physically healthier and to live longer, in part because of their healthier smoking, eating, and drinking habits.⁶

The 1996 GSS echoes some of these earlier findings. After taking account of income, family structure, education, age, sex and employment status (all of which may contribute to a person's sense of well-being), the odds of feeling very satisfied with their lives were 1.7 times higher for weekly attenders than those who had not attended religious services during the last 12 months.

People attending religious services every week also felt they had less stress in their lives. According to the 1996 GSS, weekly attenders had about half the odds (0.6) of having a very stressful life as non-attenders after accounting for other socio-demographic factors. Young weekly attenders under age 35 also were more likely to feel they had very good or excellent health than non-attenders. Young adults' feelings of better health may be related to less smoking. In 1996, only 18% of weekly young attenders were cigarette smokers compared with 38% of those age 15 to 34 who never attended. Older adults felt the same

about their health, regardless of how often they attended religious services.

Weekly attenders have happier, longer marriages Many things contribute to

happy marital or common-law relationships. While religion may sometimes be a source of conflict in some relationships where partners differ strongly in their religious views, it seems that regular

Marriages of weekly attenders last longer

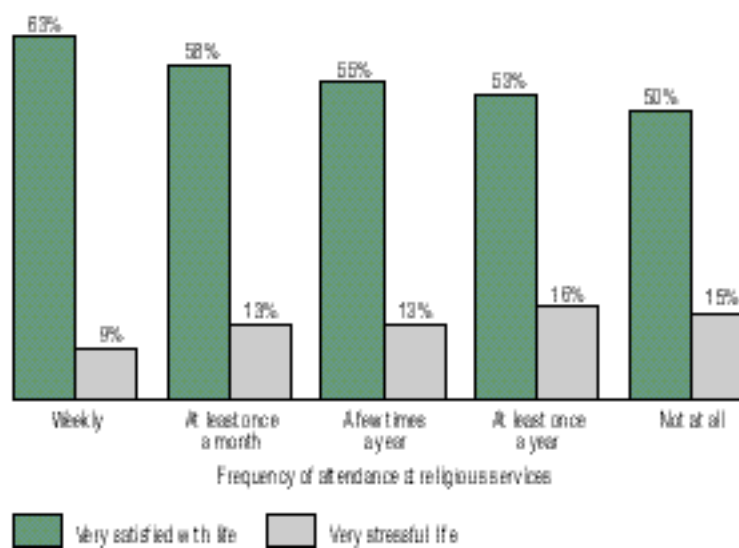
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Decade when marriage began and attendance at religious services	Duration of first marriage		
	At least 5 years	At least 10 years	At least 15 years
	%		
Married in 1950s			
Weekly	99	98	96
Not at all	98	94	91
Married in 1960s			
Weekly	97	93	89
Not at all	92	83	73
Married in 1970s			
Weekly	95	89	84
Not at all	88	74	66
Married in 1980s			
Weekly	94	89	80
Not at all	85	69	57

Source: Statistics Canada, 1995 General Social Survey.

Weekly attenders experienced less stress

CST



Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 General Social Survey.

⁶ Myers 1995, p.16; Bradley 1995, pp. 259-267; Larson, 1994; National Institute for Healthcare Research, 1998.

attendance at religious services is related to stronger marriages. The odds of having a very happy marital relationship were 1.5 times greater for those attending religious services weekly than for those who didn't attend at all (after accounting for differences in age, education, income, religion, province, employment status and the decade when the marriage began). Interestingly, income appeared to have no influence on marital happiness, after the other factors were controlled for.

An earlier study based on the 1984 Canadian Fertility Survey found that

women who attended church weekly were less likely to want to dissolve their marriage.⁷ The 1995 GSS supported these findings, showing that compared with those who never attended religious services, the odds that a weekly attender's marriage would break down were less than half.⁸ Marriage longevity of weekly attenders was greater than that of non-attenders regardless of which decade they were married. For example, 89% of the marriages of weekly attenders who were married in the 1970s lasted at least 10 years, compared with 74% of non-attenders' marriages.

Those who attended religious services each week were also less likely to have lived common-law prior to marriage (6%) than non-attenders (21%).

Summary Canada appears to be becoming increasingly secular as organized religion plays a less important role in Canadians' lives. The number of Canadians reporting no religious affiliation is increasing and attendance at religious services is declining. The long-term effect of these trends on the fabric of society is difficult to foresee.

CANADIAN SOCIAL TRENDS BACKGROUNDER

"No religion" continues to grow

At the time of the 1961 Census, less than 1% of Canadians claimed to have no religion. By 1991, this proportion had increased to almost 13%.¹ Between 1981 and 1991, the number of Canadians reporting no religious affiliation increased from 1.8 million to 3.4 million. While the 1996 Census did not have a question on religion, the 1996 General Social Survey revealed that 14% of Canadians aged 15 and over had no religious affiliation.

Historically, Canada has been predominantly Christian, with most of the population divided between Protestants and Catholics. In the last 10 years (1986 to 1996), Roman Catholics remained at about 45% of the Canadian adult population, but the share of mainline Protestant denominations (United, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran) has dropped from 28% of the adult population to 20%. At the same time, the conservative Protestant denominations² have remained at 6% of the adult population, while Eastern non-Christian Religions (Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism and other smaller groups) have grown to represent almost 3%, reflecting the increased cultural diversity of Canada.

Attendance at religious services declines Since the mid-1940s, people have been attending religious services less and less. In 1946, the Gallup Poll reported that 67% of Canadian adults had attended religious services during the previous week. By 1996, the GSS reported that only 20% of adult Canadians had attended religious services every week.³

The greatest decline in weekly attendance has been among Roman Catholics, falling from 37% in 1986 to 24% in 1996. Corresponding to the decline in weekly attendance has been an increase in the number of people who did not attend religious services during the year. While in 1986 only one in seven Roman Catholics did not attend church, by 1996 nearly one in three did not. Over the same time period, weekly attendance of mainline Protestants has declined from 17% to 14% of adults,

while conservative Protestants have maintained weekly attendance figures in the 50% to 60% range.

Religious service attendance has declined across all age groups, indicating a broad disenchantment with institutionalized religion. Not surprisingly, seniors showed the most enthusiasm for religious services. In 1996, 34% of those aged 65 and over attended weekly, compared with only 12% of 15- to 24-year-olds.

In 1996, many adults (32%) who said they were affiliated with a religion did not attend religious services at all. Another significant minority (10%) said they only attended once or twice a year. This suggests either that people are less committed to their religion or that religion has become more a personal commitment than communal worship. In the United States, attendance made a comeback in the early 1970s and 1980s as the baby boomers began to form families. Weekly attendance rates remained almost constant at 30% from 1986 to 1993.

Although attendance at religious services has declined substantially in Canada over the last 20 years, in 1995, Reginald Bibby's Project Canada survey indicated that the vast majority (81%) of Canadians still believed in God. This compares with 89% in 1975, implying that although attendance has declined sharply, most people have retained their belief in God.⁴

¹ The 1961 Census asked "What is your religion?" but had no check-off category to indicate "no religion". Respondents wishing to indicate this had to write in "no religion" in the space provided. Since 1971, each decennial Census has had a mark-in response category for "no religion".

² Includes Baptist, Pentecostal, Nazarene, Evangelical Free, Mennonite, Salvation Army, Reformed, Christian and Missionary Alliance and other smaller groups. Mainline Protestant and Conservative Protestant are defined based on definitions used by Nock 1993, p.47,48,54 and Bibby 1987, p.28.

³ The Gallup poll asked whether respondents had attended church services in the last 7 days; the GSS asks how frequently respondents have attended religious services in the last year. Since some people who attend infrequently may have actually attended last week, the Gallup Poll results may be somewhat inflated compared with the stricter GSS definition of religious observance.

⁴ Bibby 1995, pp.130-131.

Attendance at religious services can influence attitudes, which in turn have an impact on behaviour. Weekly attenders tend to be more forgiving of marital problems and less likely to cite these problems as a valid reason for ending a relationship. Religious people also hold more traditional family values, placing greater importance on children and the family and on the nurturing role of women within the family. In addition, religious people tend to report having happier, less stressful lives and happier relationships with their partners.

⁷ Balakrishnan, 1987, p. 396.

⁸ After accounting for the effect of a variety of socio-demographic factors including decade when the marriage began, education, religion, pre-marital births, teenage pregnancy, province, age difference between spouses and whether a common-law union preceded marriage.

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Eastern non-Christian religions and those reporting no religion have grown fastest

Religion	1986	1991	1996
	millions		
Roman Catholic	9.0	9.3	10.4
Mainline Protestant	5.6	5.0	4.8
Conservative Protestant	1.2	1.1	1.4
Other Protestant	0.7	0.7	1.2
Jewish	0.2	0.2	0.2
Eastern Orthodox	0.3	0.2	0.2
Eastern non-Christian religions	0.3	0.5	0.7
No religion	2.0	3.5	3.4
Not reported, don't know	0.4	0.5	1.2

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.

