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### Associations Among Religiousness and Community Volunteerism in National Random Samples of American Adults

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## **Associations Among Religiousness and Community Volunteerism in National Random Samples of American Adults**

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*The connection between religiousness and volunteering for the community can be explained through two distinct features of religion. First, religious organizations are social groups that encourage members to help others through planned opportunities. Second, helping others is regarded as an important value for members in religious organizations to uphold. We examined the relationship between religiousness and self-reported community volunteering in two independent national random surveys of American adults (i.e., the 2005 and 2007 waves of the Baylor Religion Survey). In both waves, frequency of religious service attendance was associated with an increase in likelihood that individuals would volunteer, whether through their religious organization or not, whereas frequency of reading sacred texts outside of religious services was associated with an increase in likelihood of volunteering only for or through their religious organization. The role of religion in community volunteering is discussed in light of these findings.*

**KEYWORDS** *helping behaviors, religion, values, volunteering*

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Most world religions encourage followers to help others. Across multiple nations, religious individuals are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering (Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Even mere exposure to religious words increased intent to volunteer for pro-environment causes (Sasaki et al., 2013) and for a charity (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007). However, personal religiousness does not guarantee increased helping or volunteerism (Tsang, Rowatt, & Shariff, 2014). Among college students, intentions to volunteer did not correlate appreciably with Christian Orthodoxy and were negatively correlated with extrinsic religious orientation (Hunsberger & Platonow, 1986).

On a community level, religion is a strong and consistent predictor of formal volunteering (Einolf, 2011). One reason may be religion's ability to unite a group of people on a regular basis who presumably respect a core set of shared beliefs or values. Granted, other factors play a role in the decision to volunteer, such as income and education level (Cnaan, Kasternakis, & Wineberg, 1993), but aspects of religiousness and religious organizations provide individuals with reasons and opportunities to help others. Examining how certain aspects of religiousness affect volunteerism can provide insight into how religious individuals and organizations can positively impact their communities.

## RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN VOLUNTEERISM

According to Wuthnow (1991), there are at least two ways in which religion and religious organizations can impact the willingness of members to volunteer. First, religious organizations, such as churches, mosques, and temples, act as a social group that provides opportunities for members to volunteer. This public social integration influences volunteerism by bringing together like-minded individuals and embedding them in social groups to create a network of people who can mobilize to provide assistance to others in the group or community (Cnaan et al., 1993; Graham & Haidt, 2010). Regardless of the content of religious beliefs or ideologies, people who demonstrate stronger social ties to their congregation, as measured through service attendance and trust in congregation members, were more likely to volunteer (Becker & Dhingra, 2001). Similarly, those who more strongly identify as a member of an organized religion volunteer for all types of organizations, not just religious ones (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005).

Religious social ties may serve to increase cohesion and introduce pressures on members to follow group guidelines (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008), which may impact volunteering behaviors in two ways. First, group beliefs and behaviors are likely to be internalized and become important to group members. For example, people are more likely to volunteer if their religious beliefs place importance on helping others or their religious organizations

clearly define their role in community service (Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2009; Sappington & Baker, 1995). Even when volunteering for a secular organization, people feel a stronger commitment to their religious beliefs, which may in turn lead to further volunteering (Forst & Healy, 1991). Second, concern about one's reputation within the group can result in increased volunteering, particularly for or through the place of worship (Bekkers & Schuyt, 2008). Asian Americans with religious affiliations without this pressure, including more individualistic religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, were less likely to volunteer compared to their Christian or non-affiliated counterparts (Ecklund & Park, 2007).

In support of the public social integration influence of religion, measures of religious service attendance are the most consistent predictors of volunteering, particularly for religious beneficiaries (Benson et al., 1980; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006; Wilson & Janoski, 1995). Individuals who attend services regularly are more likely to be more involved in their religious organization, whether due to social pressures or religious norms (Lam, 2002). They are also more likely to be aware of volunteering opportunities for and through their religious organization, and to know others who are involved in volunteer work (Wilson & Janoski, 1995).

However, religious groups can be influenced by the surrounding religious environment as well. For instance, Borgonovi (2008) found that areas with increased rates of religious pluralism had increased volunteering rates amongst members, whether for religious or secular causes. Simply living in a more religious country increases the likelihood of an individual volunteering, whether religious or not. However, in more secular countries, religiosity strongly predicted the likelihood of volunteering (Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006).

Religious organizations also influence volunteerism by helping members to identify which actions are indicative of their beliefs and which outcomes are worthy of their time (Park & Smith, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997; Wuthnow, 1991). This private value-based conviction, which includes behaviors such as engaging in prayer and reading of sacred texts outside of religious services, has also emerged as a positive predictor of volunteerism (Lam, 2002). These behaviors signal that religious organizations provide followers with valued behaviors to emulate, which reinforces commitment to religious beliefs, including helping others (Nelson & Dynes, 1976).

For example, most religious organizations may approve of volunteering for a local soup kitchen because the action demonstrates their care for those less fortunate and the outcome benefits the hungry in their immediate community. On the other hand, a socially conservative religious organization may not approve of volunteering for an agency that supports abortion clinics, because both the action and the outcome are counter to their religious values. A more progressive religious organization might advocate volunteering for community organizations that serve more historically disadvantaged

social groups or those perceived to violate more conservative social values in a community. Simply put, people who are more adherent to their religious beliefs restrict their volunteering behaviors to those in their group or who share their values (Choi & DiNitto, 2012; Pichon & Saroglou, 2009).

## THE PRESENT STUDY

Most prior research has focused on the impact of either social integration or value-based conviction on a single measure of volunteering. In order to more fully investigate the role of religion on different types of helping, the goal of the present study was to examine the relationship between both types of religious behaviors and volunteering for religious and secular agencies in two independent, national random samples of American adults (i.e., the 2005 and 2007 waves of the Baylor Religion Survey). Service attendance was used to estimate social integration of the individual (more frequent attendance = more social integration). Private prayer and reading of sacred texts outside of religious services were used to estimate private value-based conviction (more frequent prayer/reading = more private religious conviction). We hypothesized that religious behaviors would be associated with an increased likelihood of volunteering through both pathways, particularly for volunteering for the place of worship or through the place of worship.

## METHOD

### Participants

Two independent samples of Americans completed the Baylor Religion Survey. Wave I (Baylor University, 2005) had a final sample of 1,721 participants (745 men, 976 women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 53.6$  years, age range: 18–93 years). Wave II (Baylor University, 2007) had a final sample of 1,648 participants (775 men, 873 women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 47.4$  years, age range: 18–96 years).

### Measures and Procedure

Both waves of data collection used similar sampling and survey procedures. For Wave I, the Gallup Organization used “The Values and Beliefs of the American Public—A National Study,” a self-administered survey in the form of a 16-page booklet (Baylor University, 2005). The design included random-digit dialing sampling, phone interviews, and mailed surveys. Of the 7,041 households contacted by phone, 3,002 agreed to take part. Of these, 2,000 received a mailed survey, and 1,002 completed a phone survey and then asked to take the mailed survey. Mailed surveys were sent to 2,603 people and 1,721 were completed and returned (Bader, Mencken, & Froese,

2007). Wave II had a similar procedure, with 1,648 mailed surveys completed and returned (Baylor University, 2007). A more detailed explanation of collection and sampling procedures can be found in Bader et al. (2007).

### Outcome Variables

For Waves I and II, we examined the same three questions about community volunteerism. Respondents estimated how many hours per month they volunteered for the community through their place of worship, for the community not through their place of worship, and for their place of worship. Answers were coded on 5-point scales (0 = "none," 1 = "1–2 hours," 2 = "3–4 hours," 3 = "5–10 hours," 4 = "11 or more hours") and were recoded into a dichotomous variable (0 = "did not volunteer," 1 = "volunteered"), which is a standard categorization procedure in volunteerism research (Lam, 2002; Park & Smith, 2000; Ruiters & De Graaf, 2006).

### Predictor Variables

As indicators of religiosity, we selected three questions about frequency of service attendance, reading sacred texts, and prayer/meditation. Respondents reported their frequency of religious service attendance and frequency of reading sacred books outside of attending religious services using 9-point scales (0 = "never," 1 = "less than once a year," 2 = "once or twice a year," 3 = "several times a year," 4 = "once a month," 5 = "2–3 times a month," 6 = "about weekly," 7 = "weekly," 8 = "several times a week"). Respondents reported their frequency of prayer or meditation outside of religious services on a 6-point scale (0 = "never," 1 = "only on certain occasions," 2 = "once a week or less," 3 = "a few times a week," 4 = "once a day," 5 = "several times a day").

### Control Variables

We included several control variables in the logistic regression analyses. Gender was a dichotomous variable (0 = "male," 1 = "female"). Respondents estimated education level using a 7-point scale (1 = "8th grade or less," 2 = "9th–12th grade (no high school diploma)," 3 = "High school graduate," 4 = "Some college," 5 = "Trade/Technical/Vocational training," 6 = "College graduate," 7 = "Postgraduate work/Degree"). Estimates of household income utilized a 7-point scale (1 = "\$10,000 or less," 2 = "\$10,001–\$20,000," 3 = "\$20,001–\$35,000," 4 = "\$35,001–\$50,000," 5 = "\$50,001–\$100,000," 6 = "\$100,001–\$150,000," 7 = "\$150,001 or more"). We also included age in years and the number of hours worked the previous week in the models.

## RESULTS

We used logistic regression analyses to examine influences of religiosity on volunteerism while controlling for demographics and variables known to account for some variability in rates of volunteerism (Cnaan et al., 1993). Results are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

## Volunteering through Place of Worship

For both Waves I and II, increased religious service attendance as well as reading of sacred texts outside of services were associated with an increase in the likelihood of volunteering through a place of worship. Other significant predictors of volunteering through a place of worship included higher level of education in Wave I and increased age and income in Wave II.

## Volunteering Not through Place of Worship

In both Waves I and II, only increased religious service attendance predicted increased volunteering not through a place of worship. In Waves I and II, men, those with a higher level of education, and those with higher income were more likely to have volunteered not through their place of worship. In Wave II, age also predicted volunteering not through a place of worship.

**TABLE 1** Betas, Standard Errors, and Odds Ratios of Factors Influencing Volunteerism for Wave I (2005)

Predictor variables	Volunteering through place of worship		Volunteering not through place of worship		Volunteering for place of worship	
	Beta	Odds	Beta	Odds	Beta	Odds
<b>Religiosity</b>						
Service Attendance	.47 (.04)***	1.60	.05 (.03)*	1.06	.68 (.05)***	1.97
Reading	.10 (.03)**	1.10	.03 (.03)	1.03	.14 (.03)***	1.15
Prayer	-.01 (.06)	.99	-.05 (.04)	.95	-.06 (.06)	.94
<b>Background Characteristics</b>						
Gender	-.19 (.15)	.83	-.30 (.12)**	.74	-.19 (.16)	.83
Education	.11 (.05)*	1.11	.17 (.04)***	1.19	.04 (.05)	1.04
Income	-.04 (.06)	.96	.09 (.04)*	1.09	.01 (.06)	1.01
Age	-.01 (.01)	.99	-.01 (.00)	.99	<.01 (.01)	1.00
Worked	.01 (.00)	1.01	<.01 (.00)	1.00	.01 (.00)**	1.01
Intercept	-4.32 (.51)***	.01	-1.14 (.36)**	.32	-5.33 (.57)***	.01
<i>n</i>	1,402		1,426		1,415	

*Note.* Service Attendance = frequency of religious service attendance; Reading = frequency of reading sacred books outside of attending religious services; Prayer = frequency of prayer or meditation outside of religious services; Education = amount of education; Income = amount of household income; Worked = the number of hours worked the previous week. Standard errors are in parentheses. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**TABLE 2** Betas, Standard Errors, and Odds Ratios of Factors Influencing Volunteerism for Wave II (2007)

Predictor variables	Volunteering through place of worship		Volunteering not through place of worship		Volunteering for place of worship	
	Beta	Odds	Beta	Odds	Beta	Odds
<b>Religiosity</b>						
Service Attendance	.48 (.04)***	1.62	.09 (.03)**	1.09	.59 (.04)***	1.80
Reading	.10 (.03)**	1.10	-.01 (.03)	1.00	.14 (.03)***	1.16
Prayer	-.07 (.07)	.93	.02 (.05)	1.02	.01 (.07)	1.01
<b>Background Characteristics</b>						
Gender	.28 (.15)	1.32	-.26 (.12)*	.77	.44 (.16)**	1.55
Education	-.05 (.05)	.95	.20 (.04)***	1.22	.10 (.06)	1.11
Income	.16 (.05)**	1.18	.16 (.04)***	1.17	.10 (.05)	1.10
Age	.01* (.00)	1.01	.01 (.00)*	1.00	<.01 (.01)	1.00
Worked	<.01 (.00)	1.00	<.01 (.00)	1.00	<.01 (.01)	1.00
Intercept	-4.54 (.43)***	.01	-2.73 (.32)***	.07	-5.62 (.48)***	.01
<i>n</i>	1,447		1,436		1,441	

*Note.* Service Attendance = frequency of religious service attendance; Reading = frequency of reading sacred books outside of attending religious services; Prayer = frequency of prayer or meditation outside of religious services; Education = amount of education; Income = amount of household income; Worked = the number of hours worked the previous week. Standard errors are in parentheses. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Volunteering for Place of Worship

In both Waves I and II, increased religious service attendance and reading of sacred texts outside of services both were associated with an increase in the likelihood of volunteering for a place of worship. In addition, people who worked more hours in the previous week in Wave I and women in Wave II were more likely to have volunteered for a place of worship.

## DISCUSSION

In two independent national random samples of Americans, frequency of attendance at religious services and frequency of reading sacred texts outside of services emerged as strong, consistent predictors of volunteering. Both social integration (attendance) and value-based (reading of sacred texts) aspects of religion influence the likelihood of volunteering in religious contexts, although only frequency of religious service attendance slightly predicts volunteering for nonreligious groups. Frequency of prayer/meditation did not predict volunteerism in either sample.

In line with previous research (Bekkyrs & Schuyt, 2008; Ruiters & De Graaf, 2006), religious service attendance increases community volunteering, especially for and through religious organizations. Increased attendance may impact volunteering through a place of worship by providing

individuals with information concerning opportunities to help and people with whom to volunteer. Greater frequency of service attendance nearly doubled the probability of volunteering for one's place of worship, which may be considered an indication of commitment to the religious organization, not social engagement within it (Forst & Healy, 1991).

Reading of sacred texts outside of worship also positively predicts religious volunteering, although not as strongly as service attendance. Because reading scriptures is more connected to religious values, it may be that religious volunteering offers opportunities that are considered important actions and outcomes for members to follow (Wuthnow, 1991). It may also operate as an outlet for members to express religious devotion, which is useful in certain religious communities. For example, in more pluralistic religious environments, it may be viewed as necessary to volunteer for a religious organization to show open support for one's beliefs (Borgonovi, 2008). Another possibility is that those who read sacred texts internalize values of compassion or love of their neighbors.

A notable strength of this study is the use of a national random sample of Americans. Replication of the relationship between both religious service attendance and reading sacred texts is also noteworthy. A few limits merit discussion. First, this study does not test any causal link between religiousness and volunteering. Instead, it demonstrates that engaging in religious behaviors more frequently increases the probability that an individual will volunteer. Second, single items were used to estimate the frequency of religious service attendance and reading of sacred texts. Multi-item measures of religious dimensions, motives for religious behaviors, or potential mediators could reveal other ways religiousness influences volunteering or lack thereof.

Overall, both aspects of religious behaviors have a consistently strong and positive impact on people's likelihood to volunteer. Research suggests that because religion influences the individual through both social- and value-based means, the commitment to volunteering is more likely to last through the lifetime and inspire others. Caputo (2009) showed that young adults whose parents were religious were more likely to be civically engaged through volunteerism. This spreading effect goes beyond families and even religion itself. Lim and MacGregor (2012) found that non-religious individuals are more likely to volunteer if they have religious friends.

In closing, religious organizations have the ability to foster a culture of helping others within their community. Congregations can create this culture by encouraging members' social integration and value-based behaviors, including giving sermons or lessons about caring for others, identifying and meeting needs within the community, offering training for specialized volunteer work, or simply donating meeting or storage space for community organizations (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006; Garland, Wolfer, & Meyers, 2008). In return, these behaviors strengthen community ties and increase members' later civic engagement and spiritual fulfillment (Garland et al., 2008).

Engaging volunteer efforts through religious organizations may prove to be beneficial for the congregation and community both immediately and for years to come.

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