

## In Our Own Image

Faith inside the United States is a little odd. Christianity, in one form or another, appears to be the most mainstream faith, but with numerous other spiritual beliefs thriving alongside it. Most Americans report that their faith performs an extremely vital role in their lives, with an even larger number saying that it is crucial to their *identities*, even though the percentage that identify as “none” is steadily growing at the same rate as the “Christian” identity is declining. In Addition, our attitudes around religion are distinctive amongst established nations.

If you go to the Pew Research Center website and do a search for “Religiosity in the U.S.”, you will find a fascinating graph. This graph compares, on one axis, the “wealth” of countries, based upon their 2015 per capita gross domestic product. On the other axis, it compares religiosity based upon the percentage of people who say that they pray every day. When you look at this graph, it is easy to see that there appears to be a direct relationship between the relative “wealth” of a country and their level of religiosity. I mean, at the top, you see the poorest countries, countries like Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Senegal, topping the chart at well over 85% of people who pray every day. And, there is this nice, predictable slope as the number of people who pray drops as the wealth goes up, with the wealthiest countries, countries like Norway, Switzerland and Ireland, reporting less than 20% in citizens that pray.

Now, there are a couple of outliers... like, for example, China, who is apparently the *least* religious country surveyed, and also one of the poorest, but one wonders if this is influenced by the fact that religious expression there is very tightly controlled by the government. But, even so, they still appear on the graph as a part of that nice predictable slope.

And, then there is the United States, which stands, BOOM! All by itself, completely away from the rest of the pack, with *nothing* anywhere near it.

Of the 102 countries surveyed, the United States of America is the *only* country to have both an above average GDP *and* an above average frequency of daily prayer. The U.S. stands out like someone who showed up dressed in a tuxedo for a pool party. Wealth wise, we fall somewhere between Ireland and Switzerland, but in religiosity, we fall between Bolivia and South Africa.

To someone who studies the relationship between religion and society as an academic discipline, this is fascinating. Why is this happening? Is it because we, as a country, are still relatively new? Or maybe because we have freedom of religion encoded prominently in our constitution? Or, perhaps, it has to do with the fact that “religion” in this capitalist country is treated, legally, as a non-profit *business*. There could be a lot of reasons, but, for me, this was something that, once seen, could not be *unseen*.

If you are watching this service today, you probably identify as a Unitarian Universalist... or at least are considering Unitarian Universalism as a religious affiliation. But, in addition to that, you probably also have some sort of religious *identity*.

In 2018, the Pew Research Center did *another* survey. In this one, they grouped people by religious expression rather than religion or denomination. In this one, they grouped people

as Highly Religious, Somewhat Religious, or Non-Religious. And... no surprise, most Americans, 71%, identified as Highly or Somewhat Religious, with the rest, the Non-Religious 29% falling into the categories of either “Religious Resisters” or “Solidly Secular”.

However, when the editors of UU World decided to do their own survey via Facebook using the same questions exact questions, to Unitarian Universalists, nearly 70% of the UUs surveyed fell into one of the “non-Religious” categories.

And yet, UUs, as a group, are extremely likely to regularly attend church, while, at the same time, vastly *less* likely to pray!

So, in all the world, the United States breaks all the rules, and us UUs break them even further.

The fact is, no matter where one looks... what country, or what time period, one can *always* see how religion has influenced every aspect of the culture. We can see it in our politics, in our economies, our global trends, even in our fashion choices. Sometimes we know it... it is obvious to us, like when we see a woman wearing a hijab or a Sikh in a turban. But, if you ask yourself, right now, if what you are wearing is influenced by your religious identification... and then change the question slightly, and ask *how* is what you are wearing influenced by your religious identification... you will see that there is an answer to that question, no matter how you see yourself.

Many... most... religions have a creation myth that says that humans were created in the image of the divine. The opposite is most likely true... how we experience divinity is how we experience ourselves.

Religious expression develops in a culture... and when I use the word “Religion”, I am using it in the broadest sense, because atheists, agnostics and humanists are also expressing a religious impulse... religious expression develops usually in an organic... almost democratic sort of way. One can think of “religion” in the same way as “technology”. We have all seen, when a new technology comes along, sometimes it is adopted and sometimes it is not. Believe it or not, it usually comes down to whether the technology... or religion... *works* for people... whether it is useful, whether it makes life better.

Over time, religious expressions change, as cultures change. There was a time, in the ancient past, when many cultures practiced the ritual sacrifice of humans. Then, at some point, the practice was stopped, but animal sacrifice continued... and still does, even today, in many places. Now nearly everyone, in modern times, equate human sacrifice with the most extreme forms of barbarism, with animal sacrifice a close second... and yet, the basic *idea* of “the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the good of others” *is often* viewed favorably as heroism in the extreme.

In his 1952 book, *Answer to Job*, Carl Jung wrote:

*The fact that religious statements frequently conflict with the observed physical phenomena proves that in contrast to physical perception the spirit is autonomous, and that psychic experience is to a certain extent independent of physical data. The psyche is an autonomous factor, and religious statements are psychic confessions, which in the last resort are based on unconscious, i.e., on transcendental processes. These processes are not accessible to physical perception but demonstrate their existence through the confessions of the psyche.... That is why whenever we speak of*

*religious contents we move in a world of images that point to something ineffable.*

Put another way, one does not have to believe in an actual supernatural Supreme Being to have, in a very deep and moving way, a sense of the sacred.

And, maybe, just maybe, you are one of the many Unitarian Universalists who believe that belief in a deity is a fantasy, at best, or, at worst, a lie. I would like to leave you, now, with the words of Terry Pratchett, from the end of *Hogfather*. The scene, here, is a conversation between Death, personified, and his grand-daughter, Susan.

*"All right," said Susan. "I'm not stupid. You're saying humans need... fantasies to make life bearable."*

*REALLY? AS IF IT WAS SOME KIND OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.*

*"Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little—"*

*YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE LITTLE LIES.*

*"So we can believe the big ones?"*

*YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.*

*"They're not the same at all!"*

*YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET —Death waved a hand. AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME...SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.*

*"Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what's the point—"*

*MY POINT EXACTLY."*