



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on August 13, 2010

Couples That Pray Together, Stay Together

On August 12, the Washington Post reported that couples who share religious practices tend to be happier than those that don't. That is to say, couples that pray together, stay together.



In a report on what is described as "the first major look at relationship quality and religion across racial and ethnic lines" that was published in the August edition of *The Journal of Marriage and Family*, the *Washington Post* predictably culls from the study the most headline grabbing data.

First, the study found that, "40 percent of blacks in marriages and live-in relationships who attended religious services regularly had a partner who did the same, compared with 29 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 29 percent of Hispanics." White couples, however, indicated a higher level of satisfaction with their relationships than those of other races, which, according to the *Post*, is attributable to "income and educational advantages" enjoyed by white people. The racial gap shrinks, then, when religion is thrown into the mix. This reads as a sort of backhanded compliment to the pious, particularly to black church-going folk.

That is, the report seems to suggest, white people don't need religion to be happy because they have good jobs and lots of money. Minorities, on the other hand, need the opiate of religion to dull the pain of their sorry economic plight and to make themselves feel "satisfied" with their lots. While this is likely not the underlying point of the study or its report in the *Washington Post*, it is arguably a reasonably sound inference and one that is not addressed.

The study that is the subject of the *Washington Post* article (and a similar one at slate.com) found that among all the various aspects of religious devotion, the one that had the most unifying effect on marriage was prayer. "Praying together as a couple is something that is very intimate for people who are religious," said study co-author W. Bradford Wilcox, director of [the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia](#). "It adds another level of closeness to a relationship." Also, regular family Bible study was shown to be nearly as reliable an adhesive as prayer.

The article then goes on to chronicle the stories of a few couples that testify that shared spirituality is the *sine qua non* of their successful unions. "Our relationship with the Lord has definitely been the glue



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that has held it together," said Sade, 34, an author and artist quoted in the *Post* story. Her husband reiterates her evaluation of the power of piety.

After reporting the solidifying effect on a marriage of sharing religious beliefs and practices, the piece goes on to claim that in marriages where the spouses are of differing faiths, religion might actually be the cause of discord. "When one partner attends services regularly and the other does not, relationship satisfaction is lower.

Two nonreligious partners are more content together than partners with different practices," the study reports.

One expert interviewed by the *Post* reckons that it may be more than just a common commitment to church that holds couples together. It may be more attributable to sharing activities of a variety of sorts. "When couples do things together — whether it's bird-watching, playing tennis or attending church — they tend to do better," Wilcox said, and "when they don't share these activities, particularly when they are important, couples are more likely to suffer."

While the findings published in the journal and in the *Washington Post* article are encouraging, there are those who point to flaws in the survey. One such doubter is Frank Fincham, the director of the Family Institute at Florida State University. Mr. Fincham posits that a more accurate description of the tie that binds couples together is not so much devotion to religious practices, but some other less tangible aspect of religiosity that prompts congregants to be happy or claim to be so.

There are other limitations of the survey. For example, those conducting the research interviewed only one spouse or partner. Also, there was no control built into the survey itself to account for factors other than income, education, and religion that might account for stability and satisfaction in a committed relationship. The metric, then, is skewed and the results will be influenced accordingly.

The 2006 survey was conducted in the U.S. of 1,387 adults ages 18 to 59. The report of the findings published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* indicates that close to 90 percent of respondents were married, and the others were living together.

Perhaps the finest part of the *Post* article was the quote given by the Rev. James E. Terrell, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Reverend Terrell crystallized the role of dogma that informed the data. He very sagaciously noted that, "People seem to do better when they think there is a spiritual aspect to their marriage." Including, Terrell added, "seeking the Lord in terms of resolving problems and differences. Without a doubt, it helps to keep a marriage together."



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