

Does Religion Do More Harm or Good?

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Tuesday November 2nd 2010

Economist Debates



Religion

This house believes that religion is a force for good.

The new atheist argument:

Dawkins: “Faith is one of the world’s great evils.”

Hitchens: “Religion is violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children.”

Harris: religion is “both false and dangerous.”

Psychological Bulletin, 2012

- “Does Religious Belief Promote Prosociality?: A Critical Examination”

Is religion toxic? Or does it enhance human flourishing?

- The Crusades and Inquisitions, the KKK, the gay-bashing religious right
- Muslim terrorists, the Taliban
- The anti-slavery movement, the faith-fostered hospitals, orphanages, hospices, and universities
- The genocides of Stalin and Mao

The extremes remind us: *religion comes in varied forms with varied effects*

Faith and human flourishing

- Faith and happiness

Faith and Happiness

- Freud: Religion as sickness
 - Hitchens: religion “does not make its adherents happy”



- C. S. Lewis: “Joy is the serious business of heaven”

Spirituality and Happiness

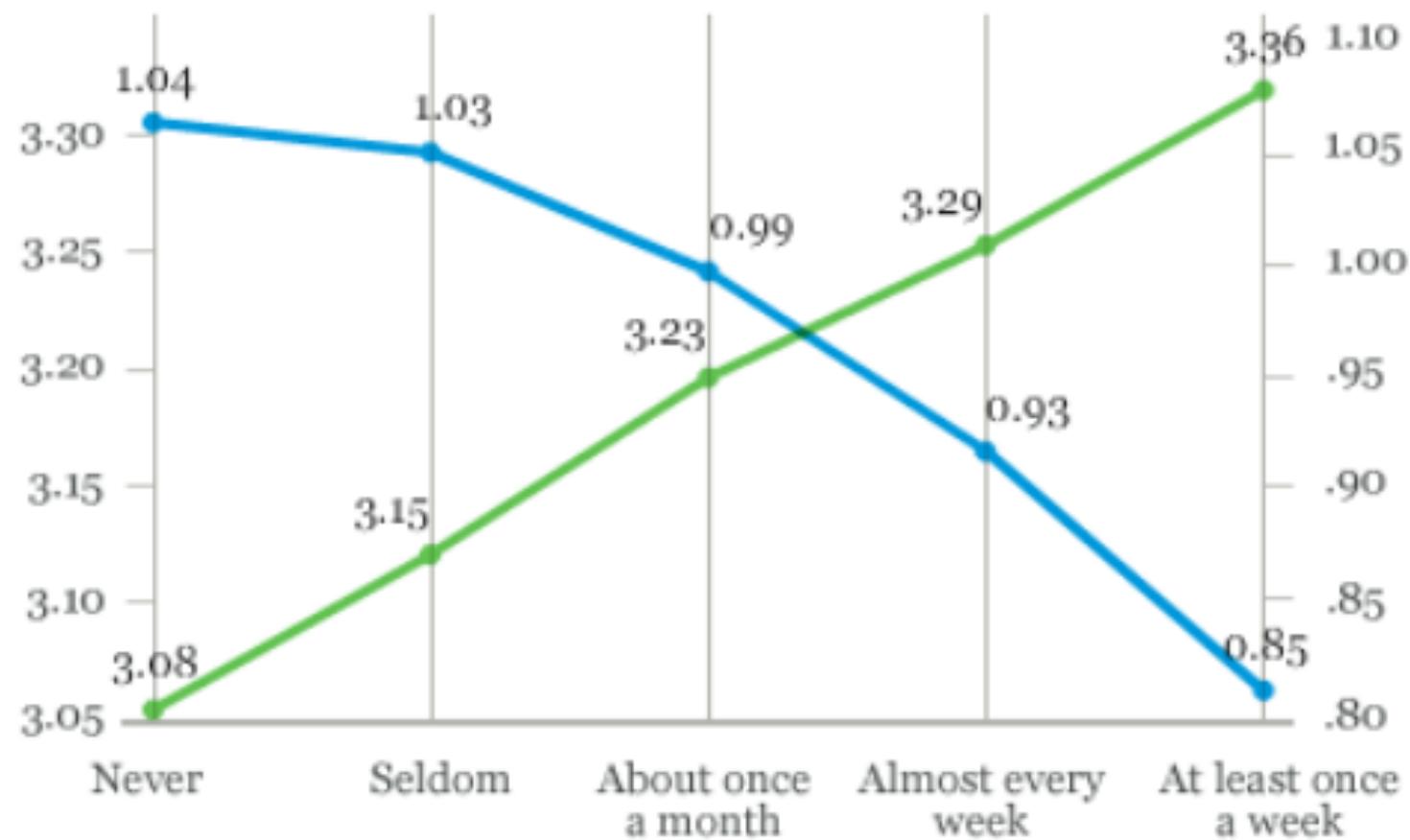
Percent “very happy”



From Gallup survey of adult Americans.

Average Number of Daily Positive and Negative Emotions, by Church Attendance

■ Positive ■ Negative



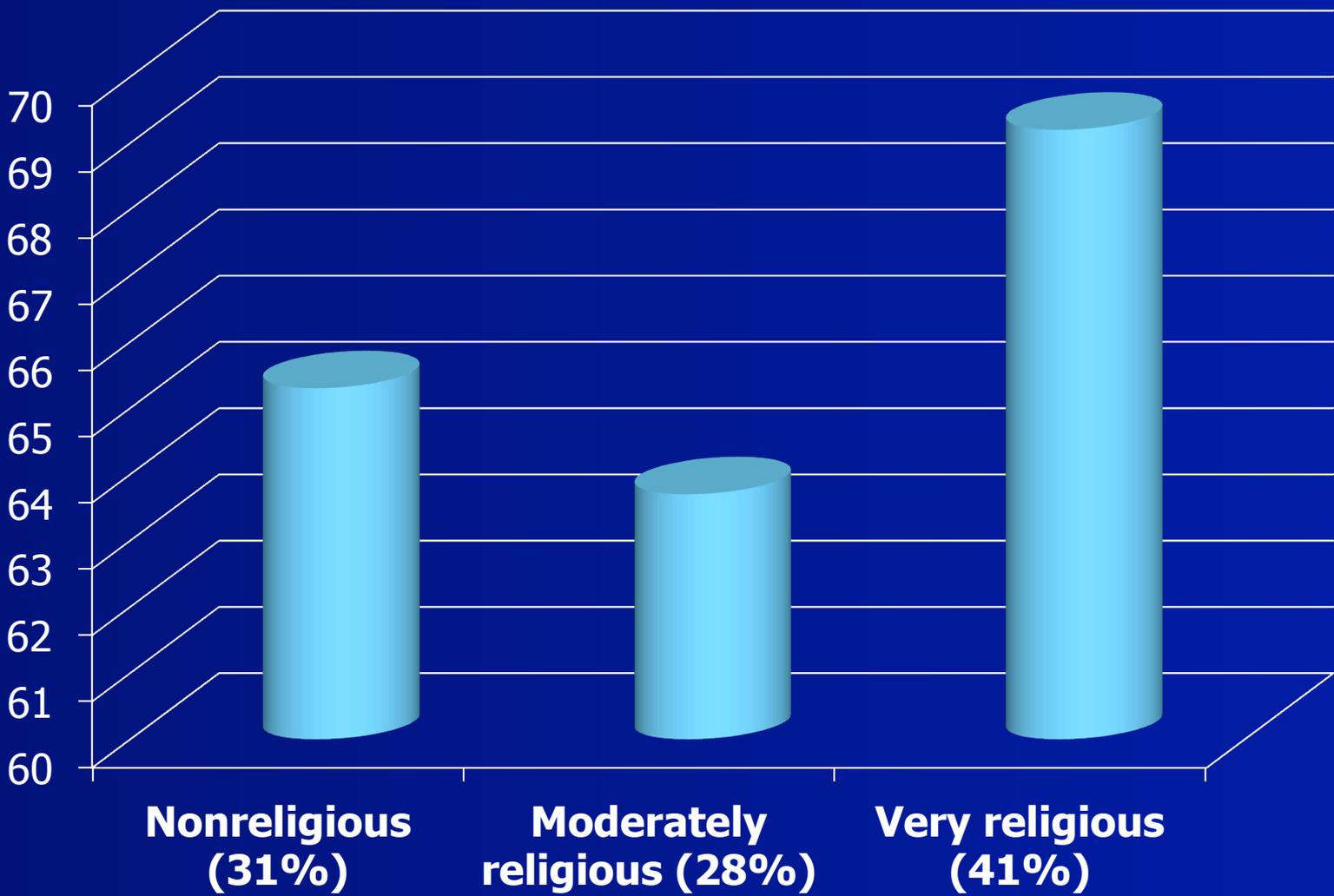
Jan. 2-Dec. 31, 2011

Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index

GALLUP

Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index (676,000 Americans during 2010 & 2011)

(Newport, Witters, & Sangeeta, gallup.com, 2/16/2012)



Gallup surveys of 350,000 Americans, 2010
(www.gallup.com, 31 December 2010)

“Very religious Americans are doing very well: . . . very religious Americans have higher overall wellbeing, lead healthier lives, and are less likely to have ever been diagnosed with depression . . .”

But does religious engagement *cause* happiness?

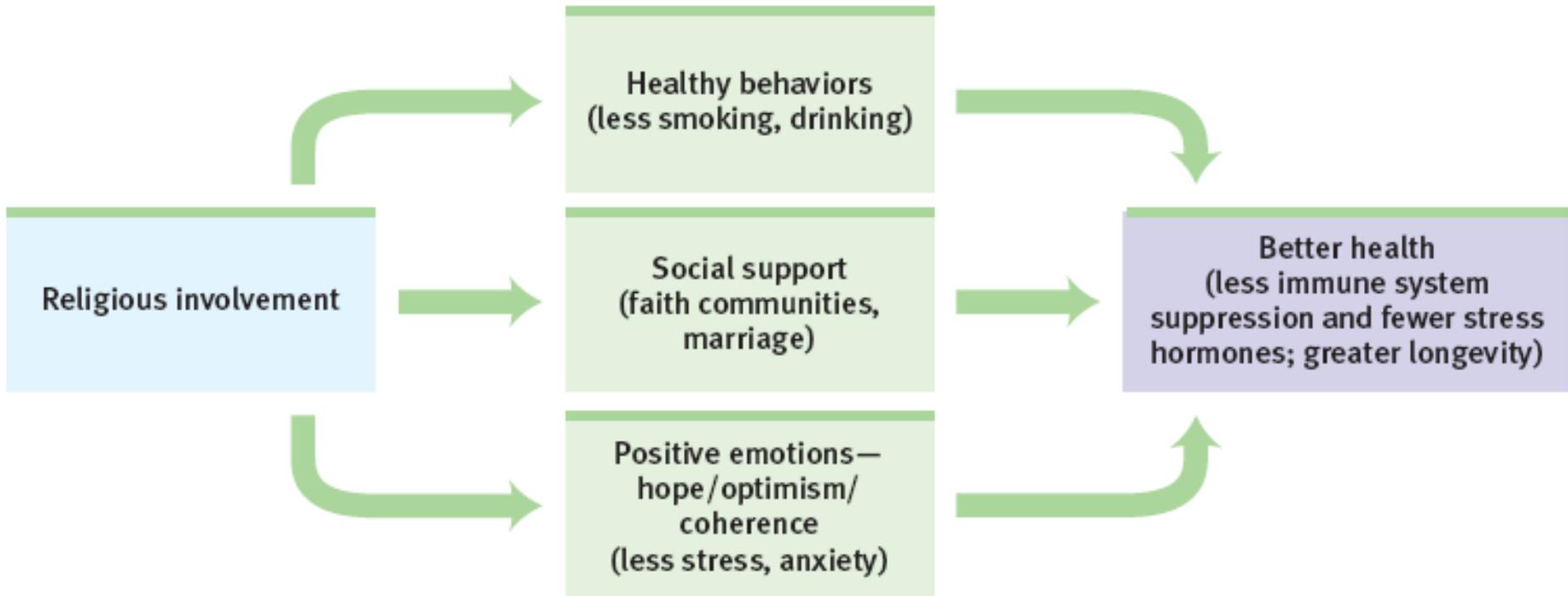
- Australian-German research team mined data from 20 years of annual interviews of 12,000+ Germans
- “Individuals who become **more religious** over time record long term **gains in life satisfaction**, while those who become less religious record long term losses.”
- Ergo, “religious beliefs and activities can make a substantial difference to life satisfaction.”

Faith and human flourishing

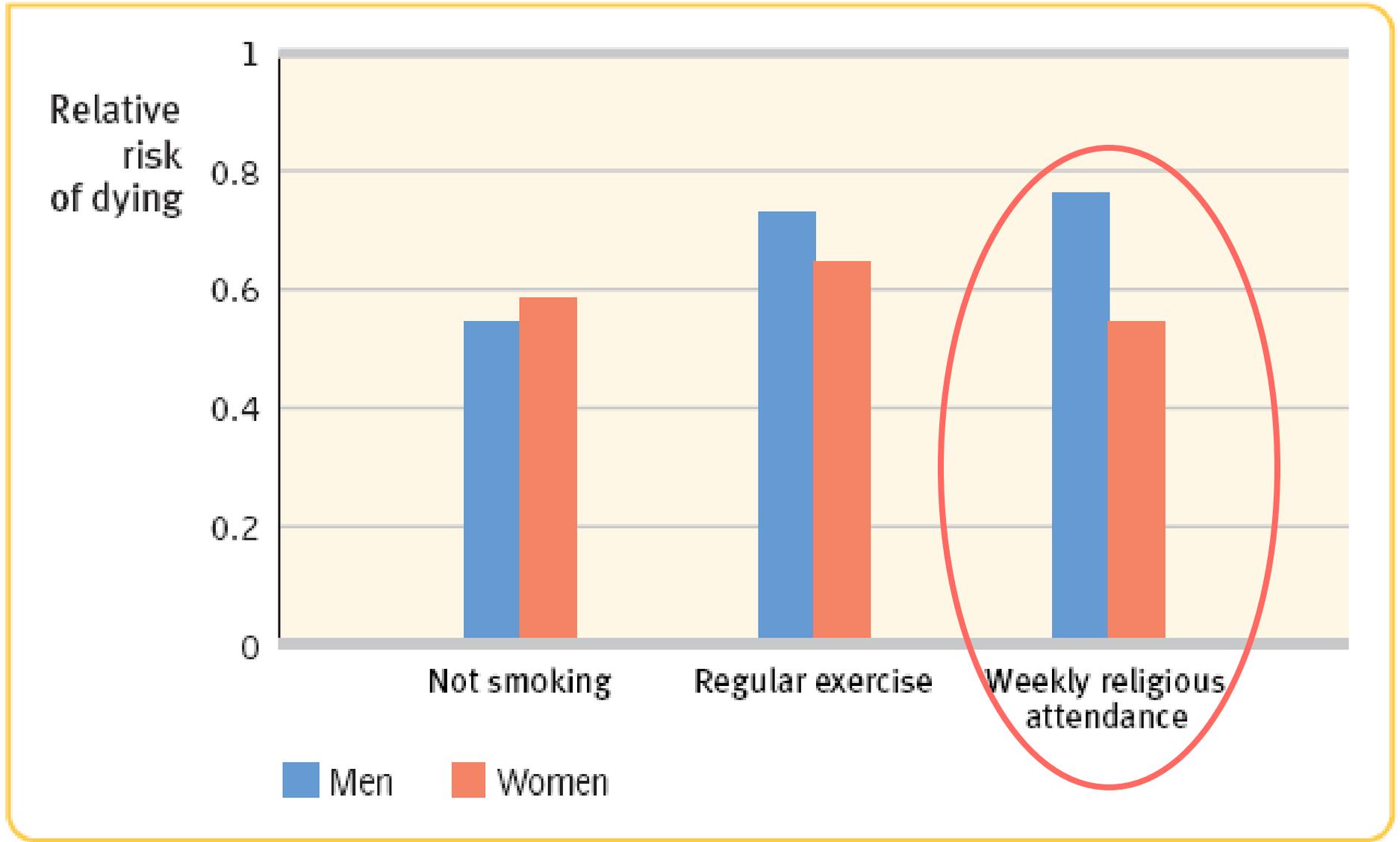
- Faith and happiness
- Faith and health

Social and psychological well-being affect **physical health**

- Negative emotions correlate with
 - cardiovascular disease
 - diminished immune functioning
 - premature death
- Lack of social support predicts increased risk of ill health and premature death



Study following 5286 Californians over 28 years (McCullough et. al.)



Faith and human flourishing

- Faith and happiness
- Faith and health
- Faith and helping behaviors

Two worldviews . . .

- The universe has “no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference” (Dawkins)
- The religious idea: all people are God’s children whom the creator admonishes us to love, with selfless compassion.

World Parliament of Religion, 1993

“Every form of egoism should be rejected We must treat others as we wish others to treat us We consider humankind our family.”

Taize chant (*Ubi Caritas*)

“Live in charity
and steadfast love.
Live in charity
God will dwell with you.”

Evolutionary psychologists: religion fosters morality, social cohesion, and group survival.

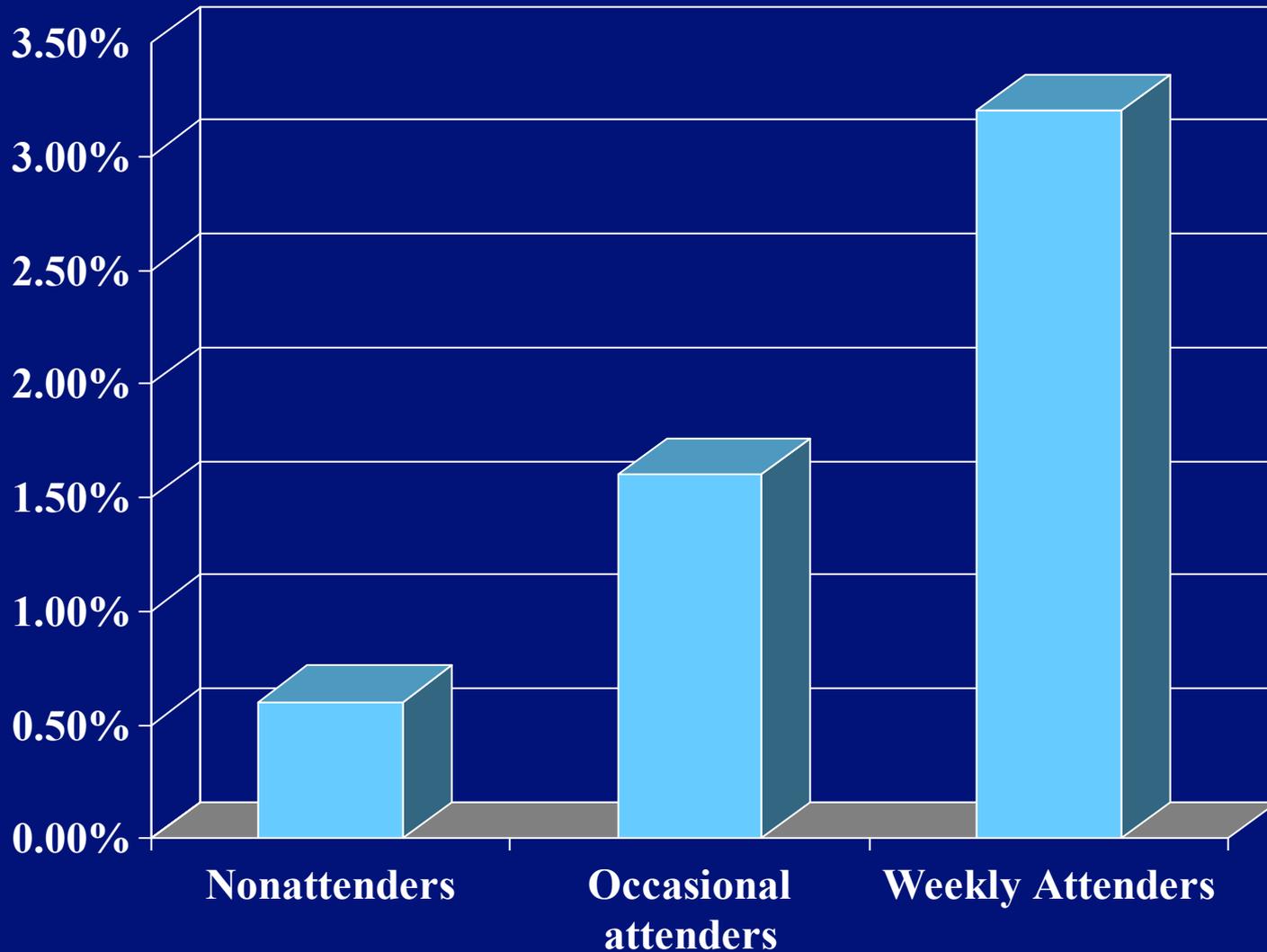
Faith and Values

- Actively religious people *much* less often
 - are juvenile delinquents
 - abuse drugs and alcohol
- Actively religious Israelis, Dutch, Spaniards, Greeks, and Germans are less hedonistic and self-oriented

Faith and generosity

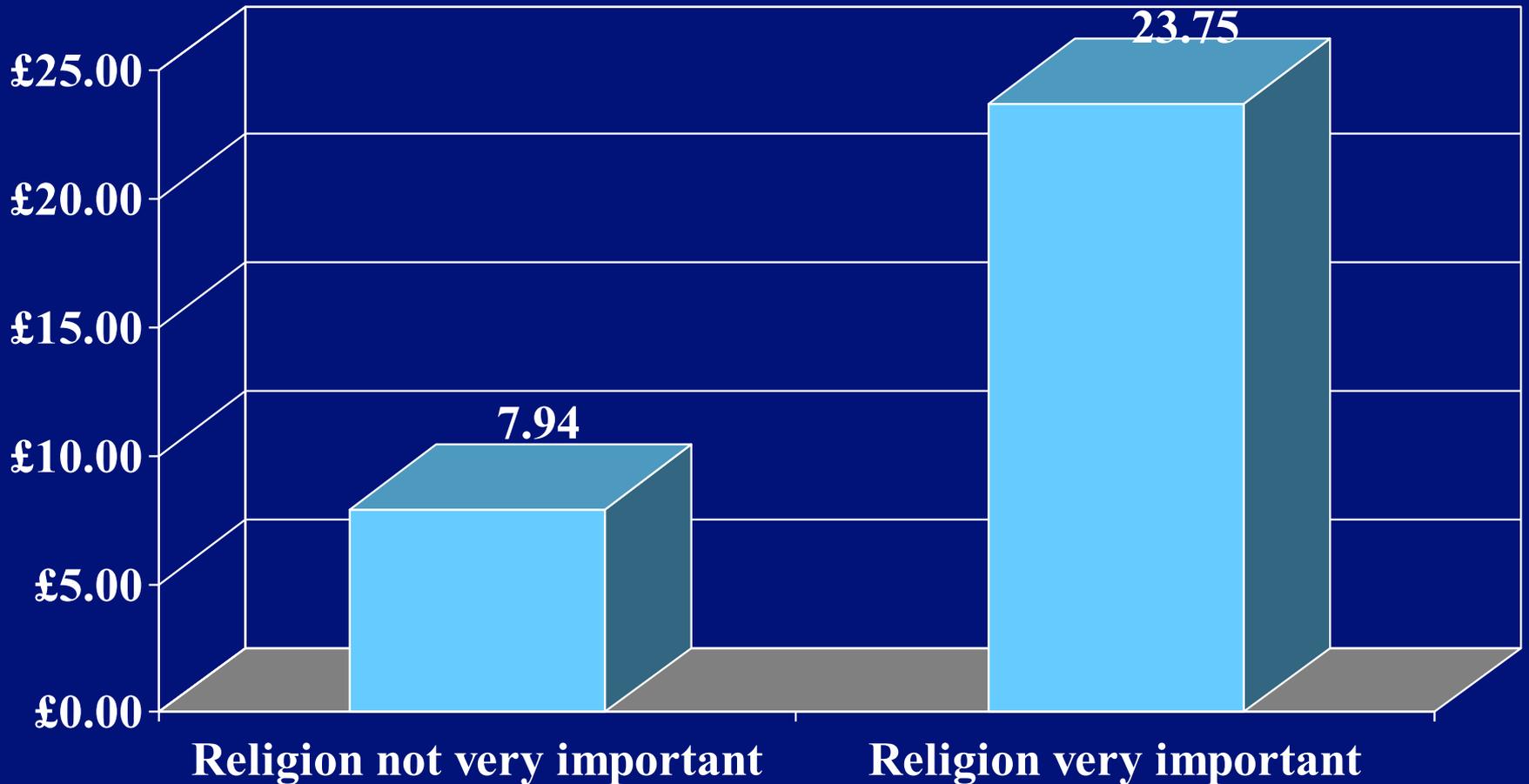
- Money
- Time

Charitable Contributions



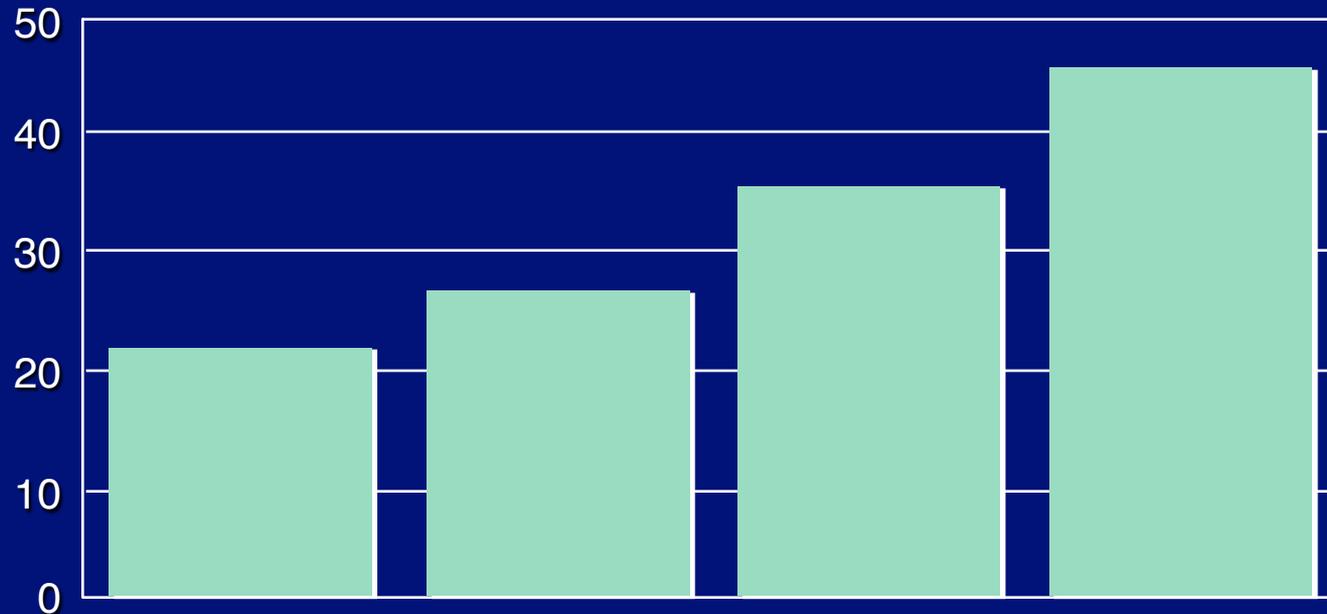
UK Monthly Charitable Contributions

(as reported by M. Argyle, *Psychologist*, January, 2002 from Halfpenny & Lowe, 1994)



Percent Working Among the Poor, Infirm, or Elderly

Percentage

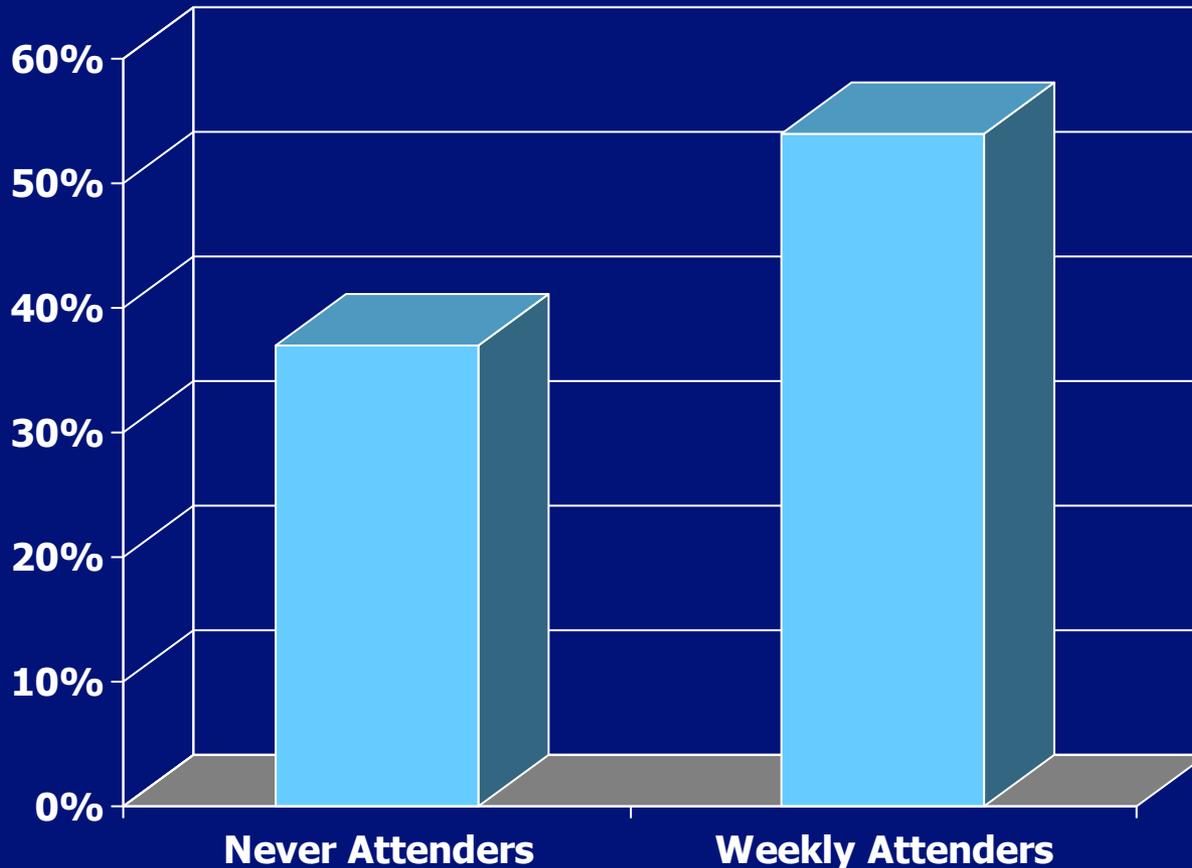


“Highly uncommitted” “Moderately uncommitted” “Moderately committed” “Highly committed”

Spiritual commitment

Is volunteering church-focused?

(Data from a Gallup-conducted "Baylor Religion Survey" of 1,721 Americans, reported by F. C. Mencken and C. D. Bader, 2007)



Percent Doing Community Volunteering "Not Through the Church"

Robert Putnam and David Campbell: *American Grace: How Religion is Reshaping Our Civic and Political Lives*

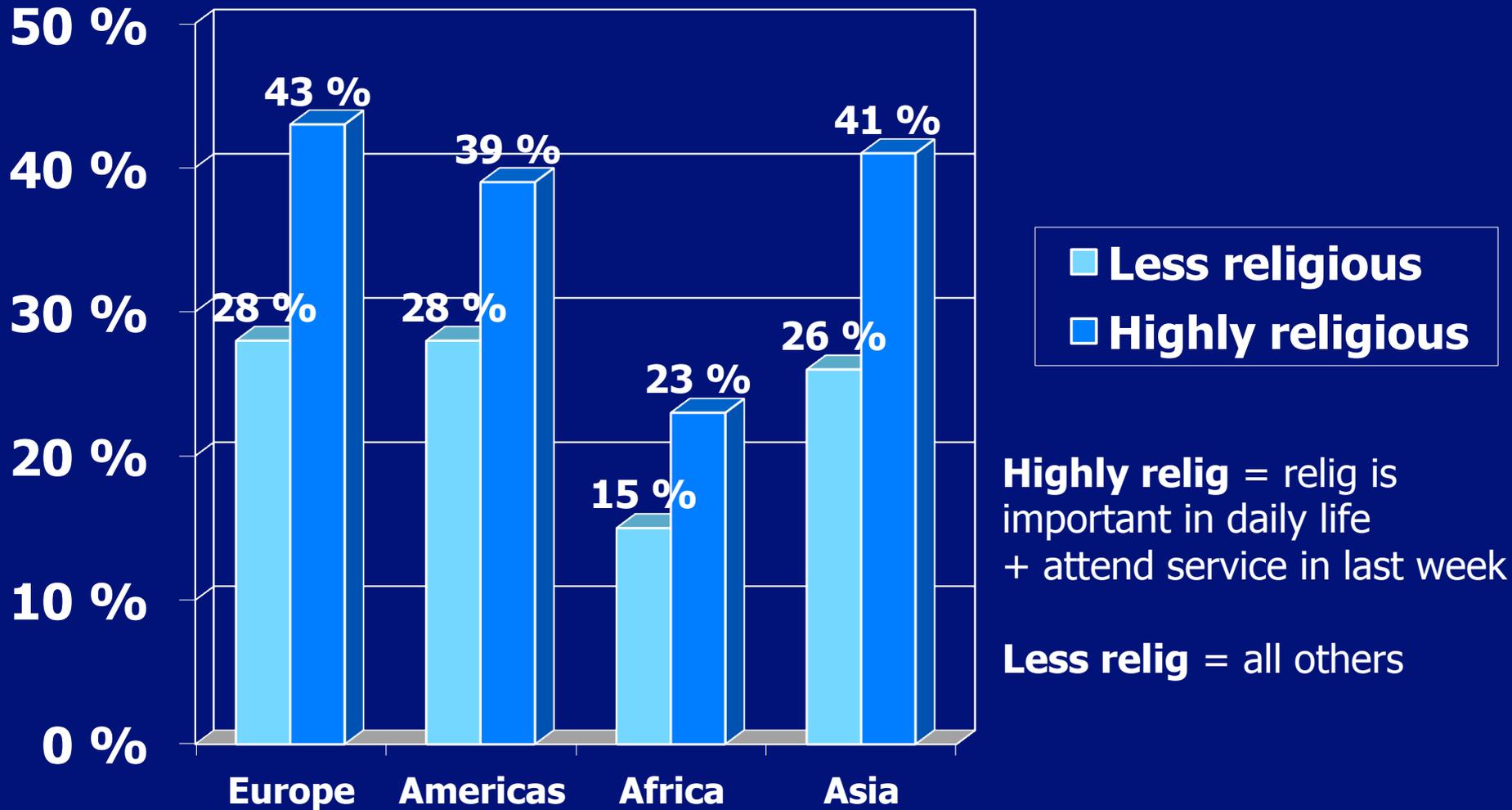
- Religious Americans 3+ times more likely to be **involved in community** (belong to voluntary associations, attend public meetings, donate time and \$)
- Link appears **causal**: nonattenders become more engaged after attending

**“National Context, Religiosity, and Volunteering:
Results from 53 Countries”** (*American Sociological
Review*, 2006, by Stijn Ruiter and Nan Dirk De Graaf)

- European Values Surveys and World Values Surveys of 117,007 people
- “People who attend church twice a week are more than 5 times more likely to volunteer than people who never visit church.”

Gallup World Survey

2000+ per country x 140 countries, 2006 to 2008



Have you done any of the following in the last month:

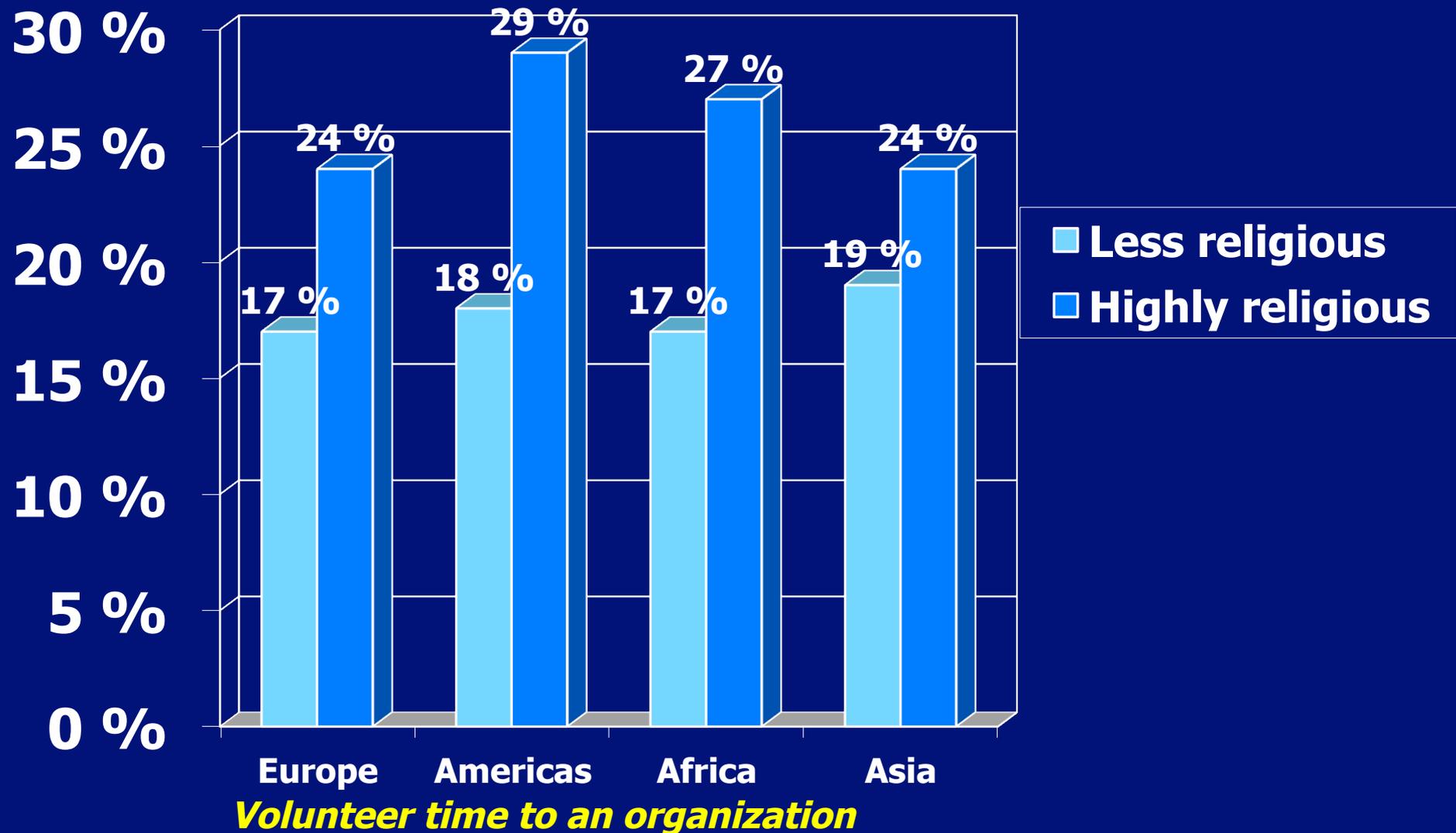
Donate to charity

Annual income of highly religious = \$10,000
(£6,000)

Annual income of less religious = \$17,500
(£11,000)

“The data presented here offer compelling evidence of the role of religious dedication in helping to encourage supportive, community-oriented behaviors”

Gallup World Survey



“Priming” (subtly activating) religious thoughts enhances generosity

- UBC experiment (replicated in USA & Belgium):
 - Participants first unscrambled sentences, which for some included the words *spirit*, *divine*, *God*, *sacred*, and *prophet*.
 - Then given a choice—how many \$1 coins to keep vs. give?
 - Those primed with the God concepts were doubly generous (average of \$4.22 versus \$1.84).

**“I want my attorney, my tailor,
my servants, even my wife to
believe in God . . . Then I shall
be robbed and cuckolded less
often.”**

~ Voltaire

The bottom line:

- So, is religion “toxic,” “dangerous,” and “one of the world’s great evils”?
- Actually, religious engagement predicts
 - Happiness
 - Health
 - Helping

But a fact of life . . .

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The Chronicle Review

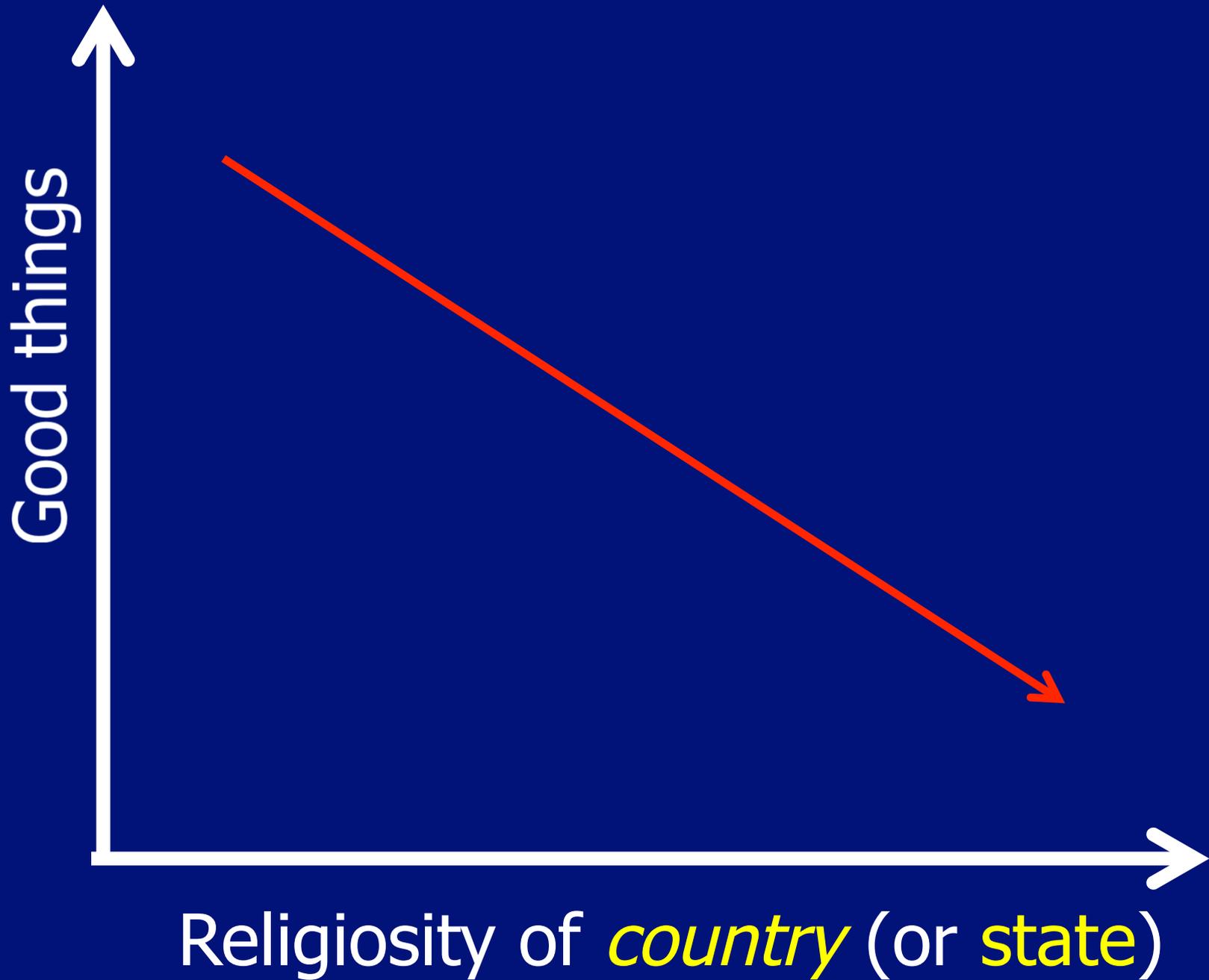
From the issue dated January 30, 2009

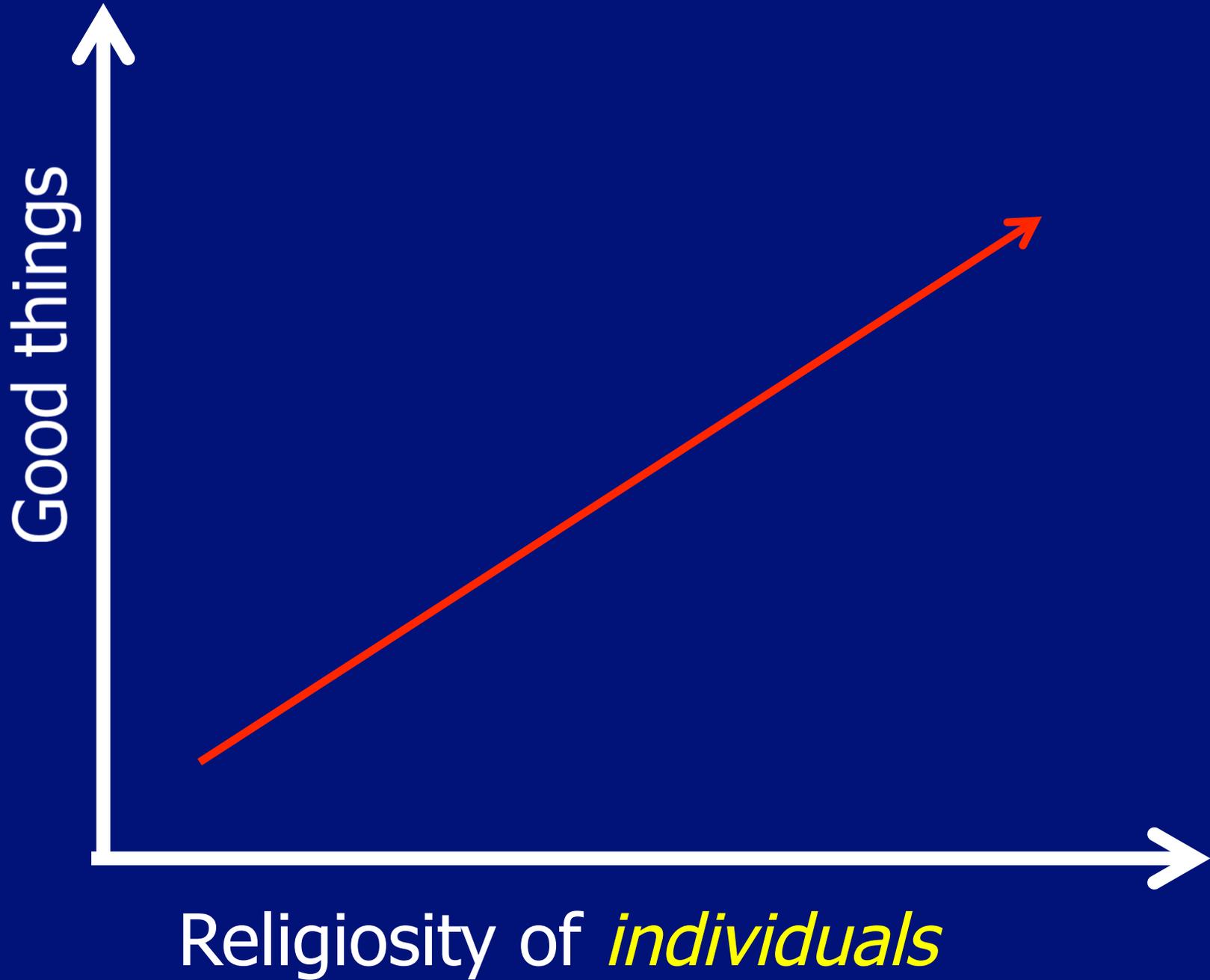
CONSIDER THIS

The Virtues of Godlessness

The least religious nations are also the most healthy and successful

By PHIL ZUCKERMAN





The religious engagement paradox:

Religious engagement correlates

- *negatively* with well-being across places
- *positively* across individuals

I.e., *irreligious places* (nations, states) and *religious individuals* are flourishing

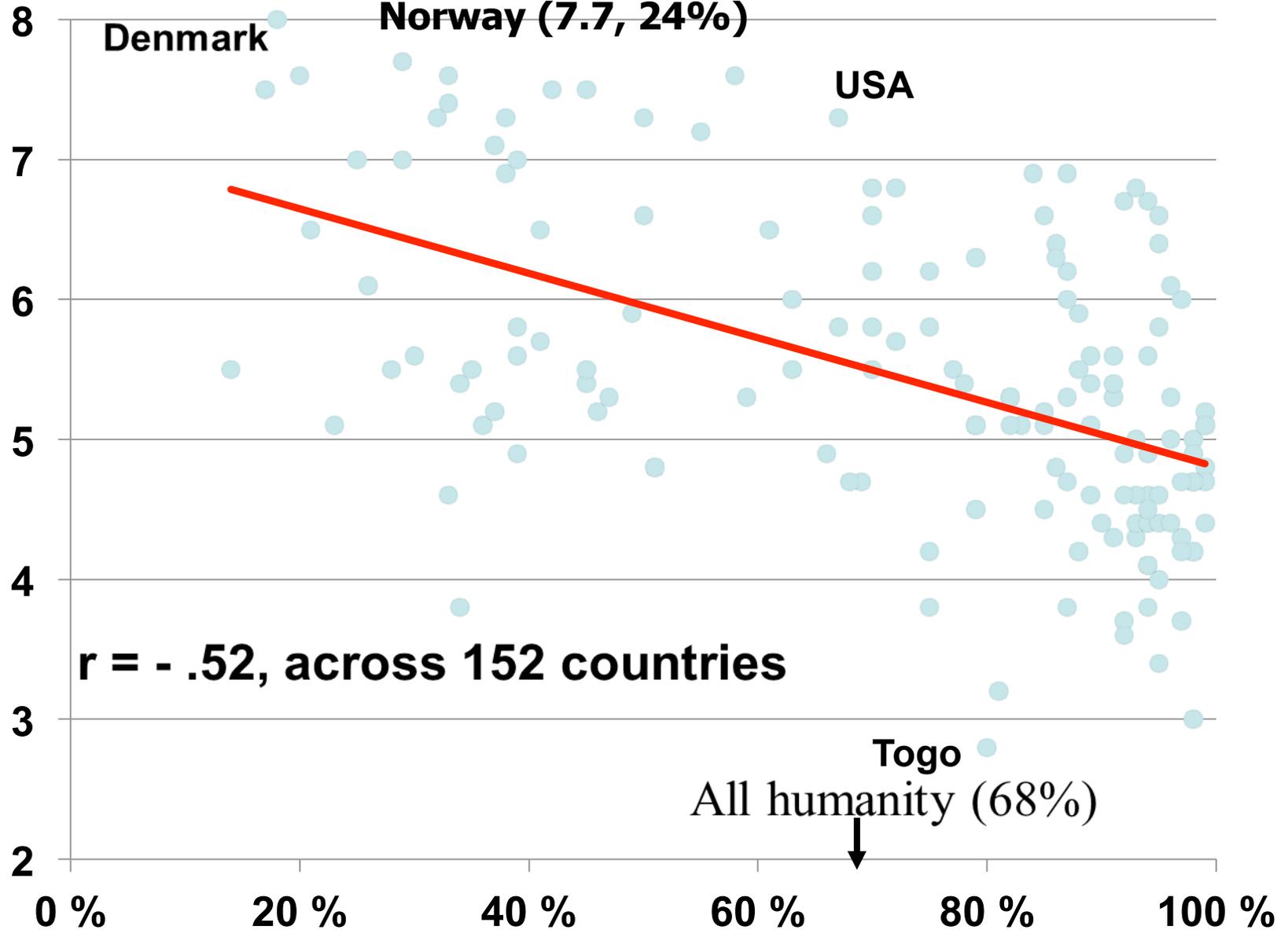
Indeed, people in religious countries and/or states

- Are less satisfied
- Die sooner
- Smoke more
- Commit more crime
- Have more teen births

Life Today

Gallup World Survey, 2006-2008

0 = worst possible, 10 = best possible

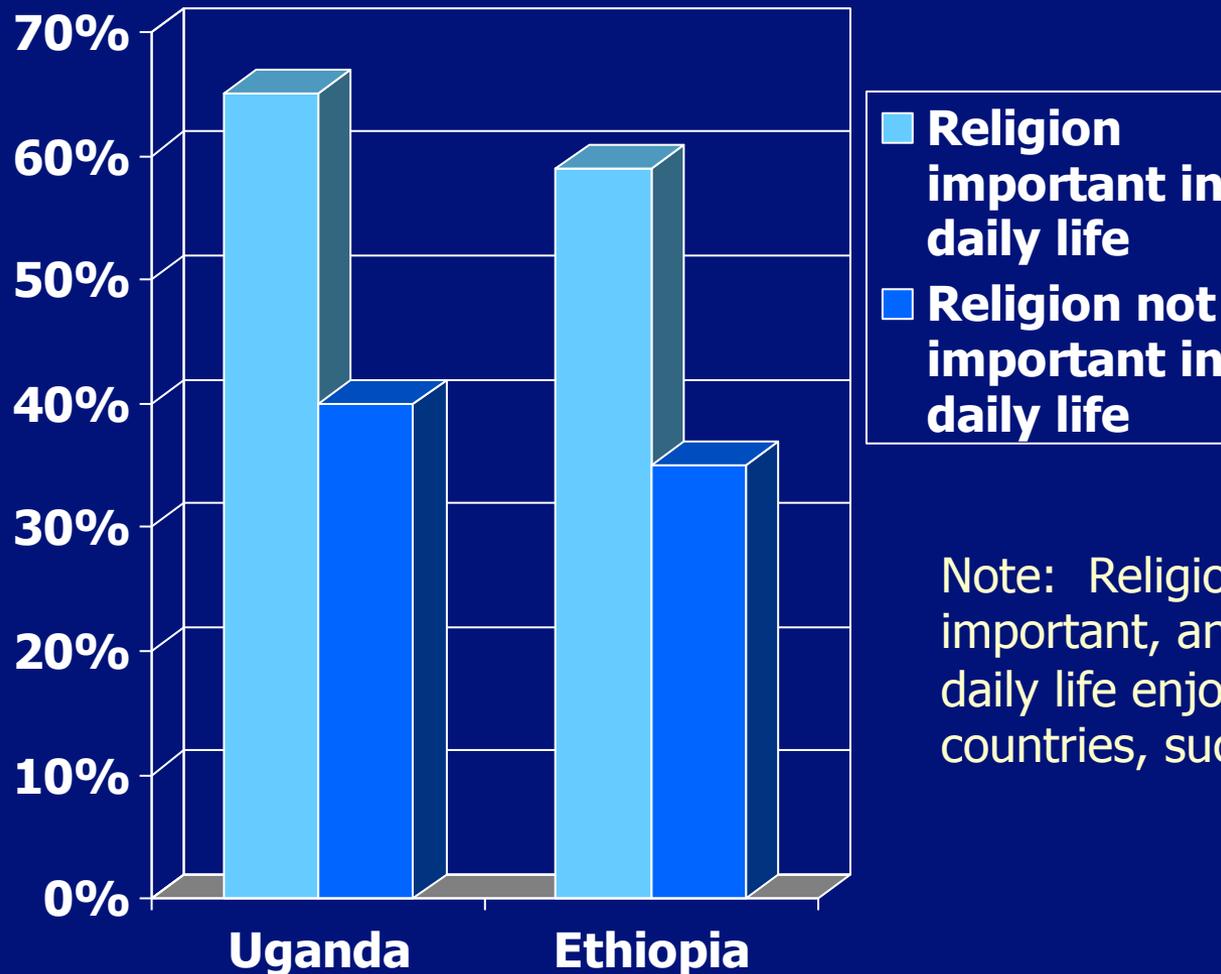


Percentage saying religion is important in their daily life

**The negative correlation
disappears when controlling for
life circumstances (e.g., income)**

*(Diener, Tay, & Myers, Journal of Personality
and Social Psychology, 2011)*

Experienced enjoyment "during a lot of the day yesterday" (Gallup Poll, 2008, controlling for gender, age, etc.)



Note: Religion is most important, and best predicts daily life enjoyment, in poorer countries, such as these.

Ed Diener observations on Gallup data (personal communication, 1/16/2009)

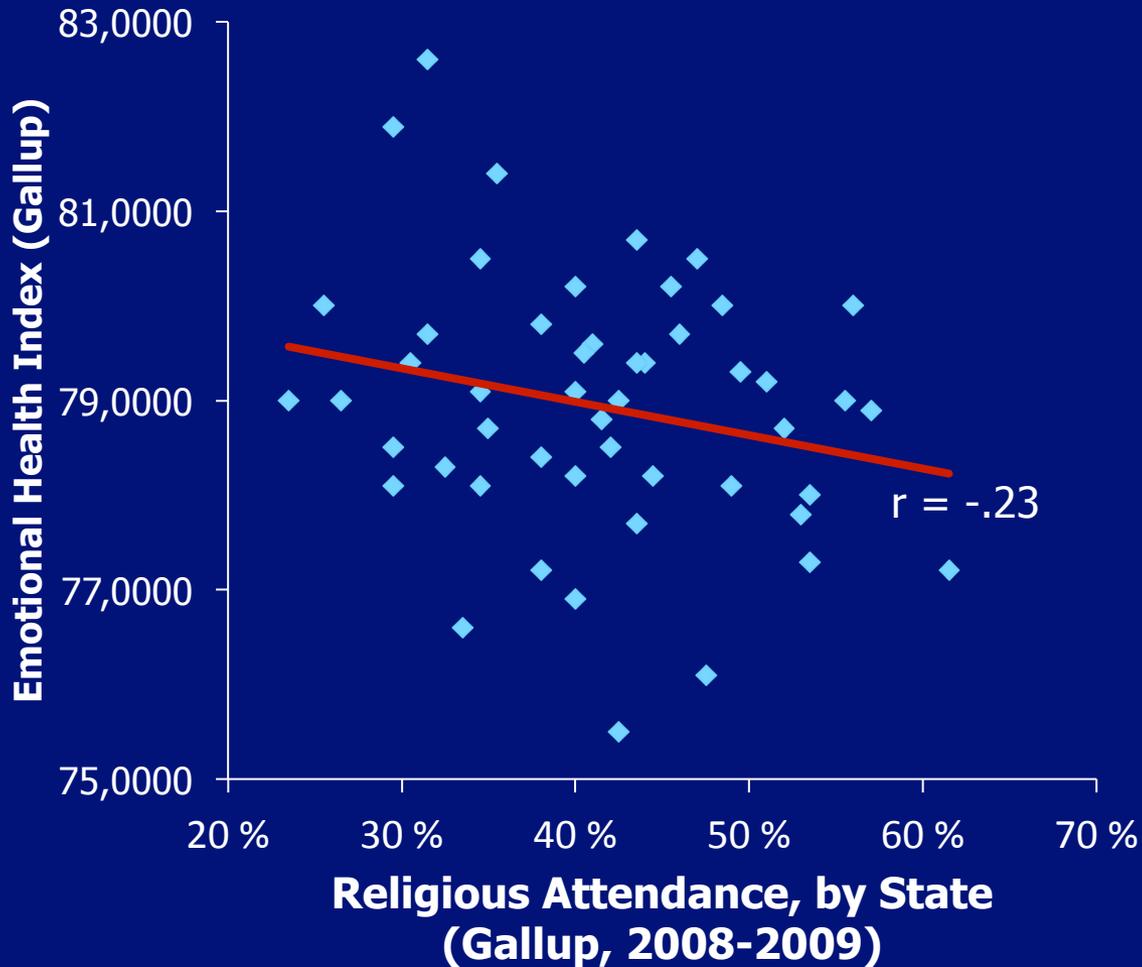
■ Across *nations*

- Negative correlation between national religiosity and life satisfaction
- Controlling for income (which is lower in highly religious countries) the correlation disappears

■ Across *individuals* within most countries: “religious people have higher life satisfaction in most every nation”

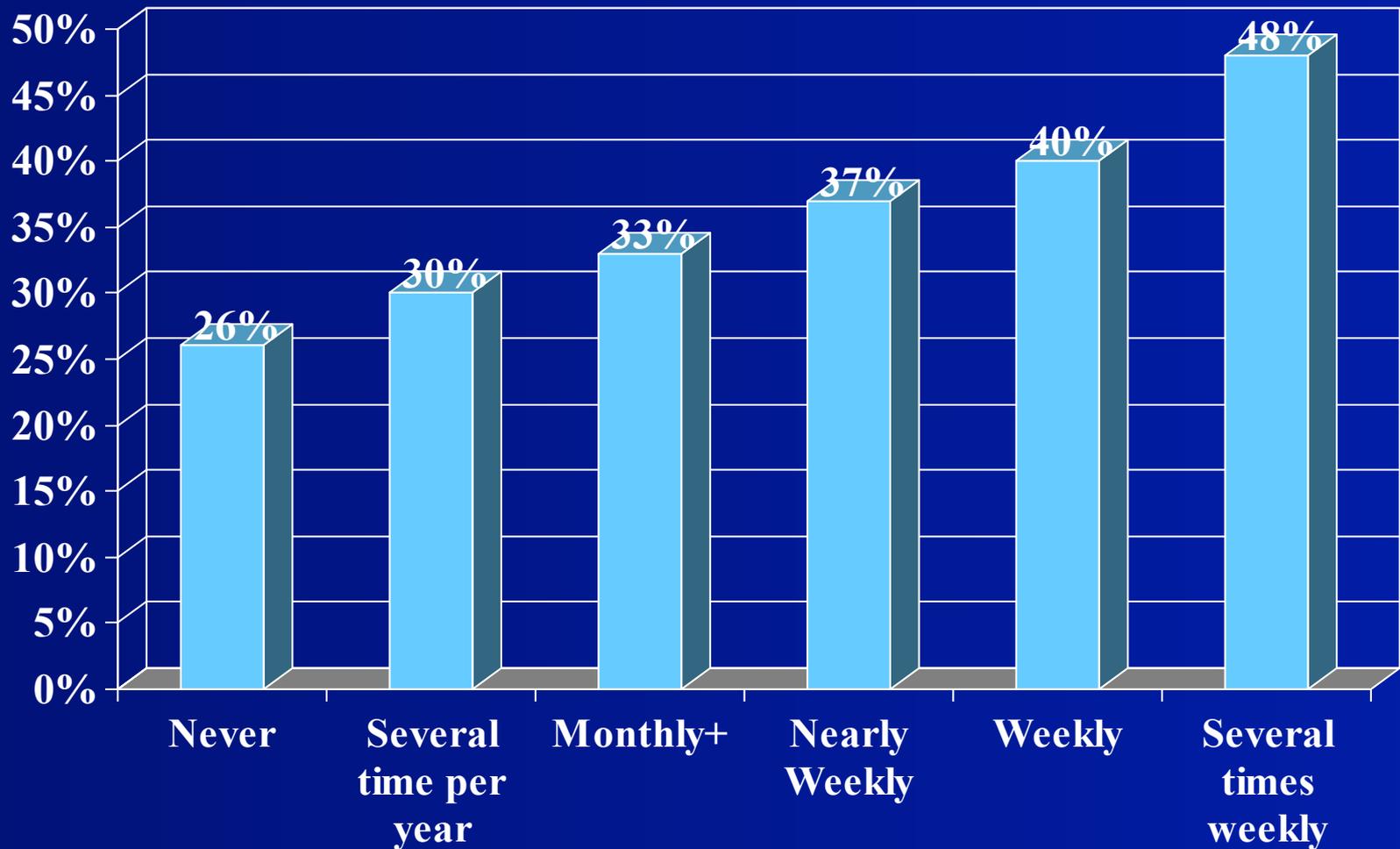
**The same religious
engagement paradox occurs
across American states**

Emotional Well-Being

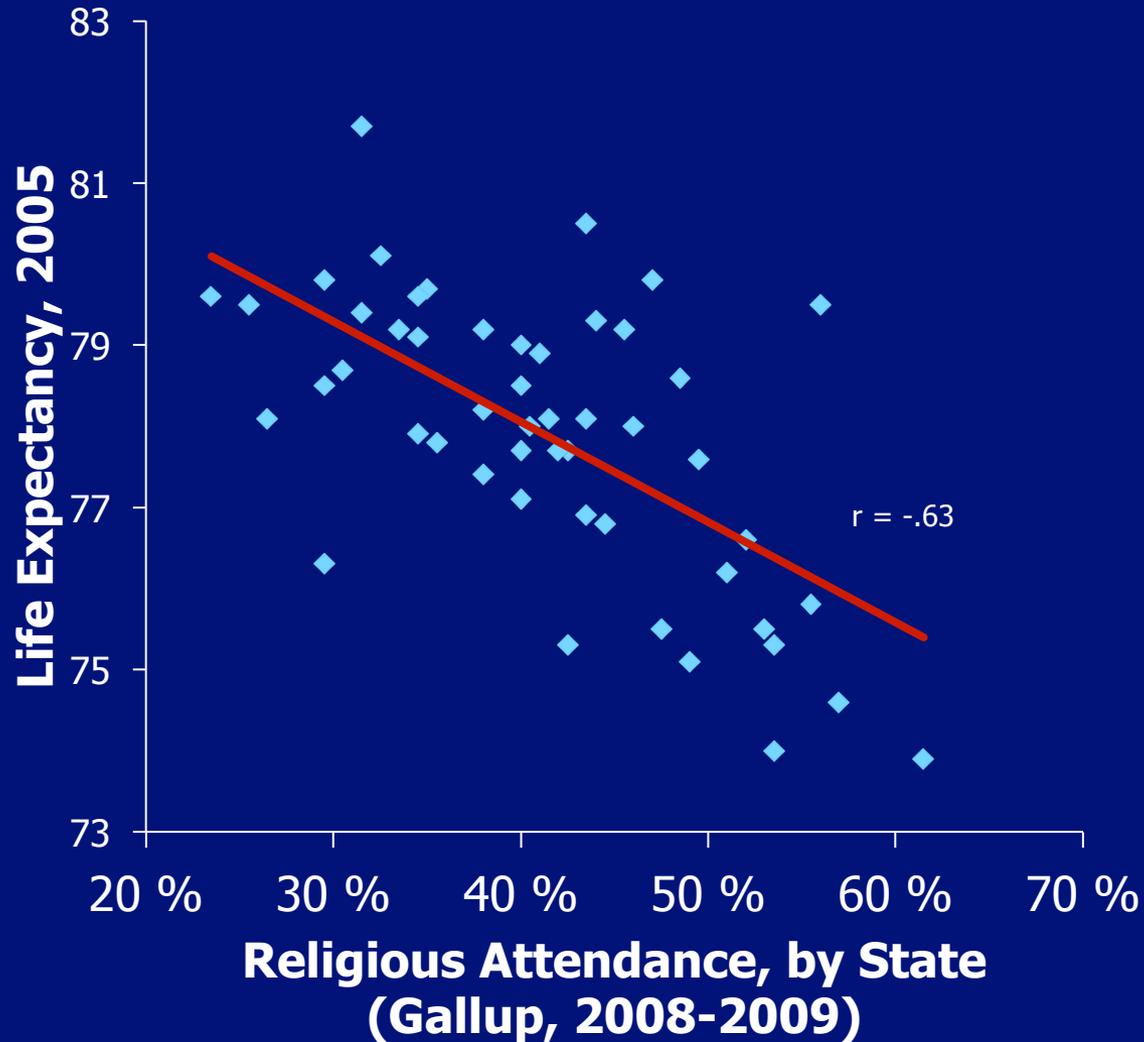


% Very Happy and Religious Attendance

(n=51,858, NORC, 1972-2012)

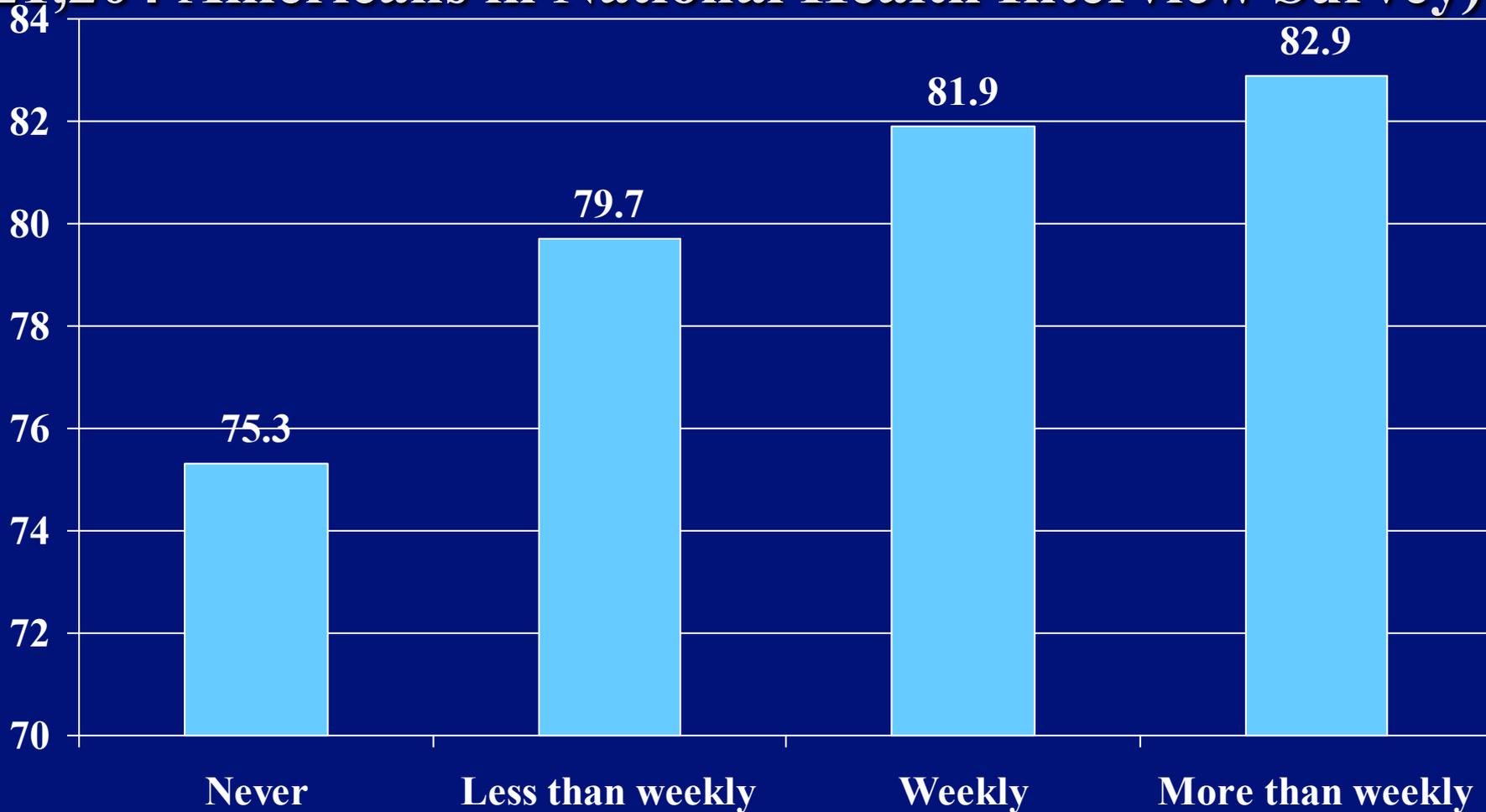


Life expectancy

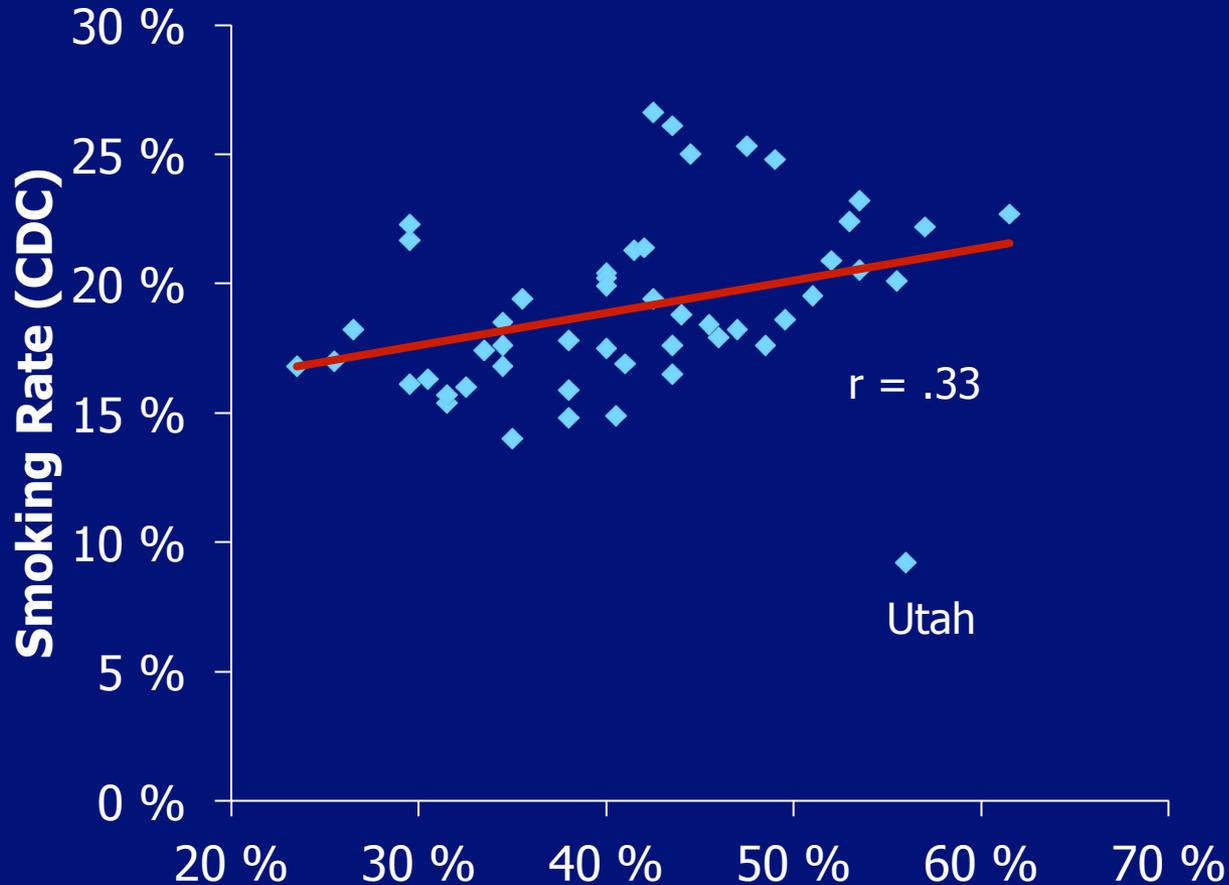


Life Expectancy at Age 20, by Worship Attendance

(21,204 Americans in National Health Interview Survey)

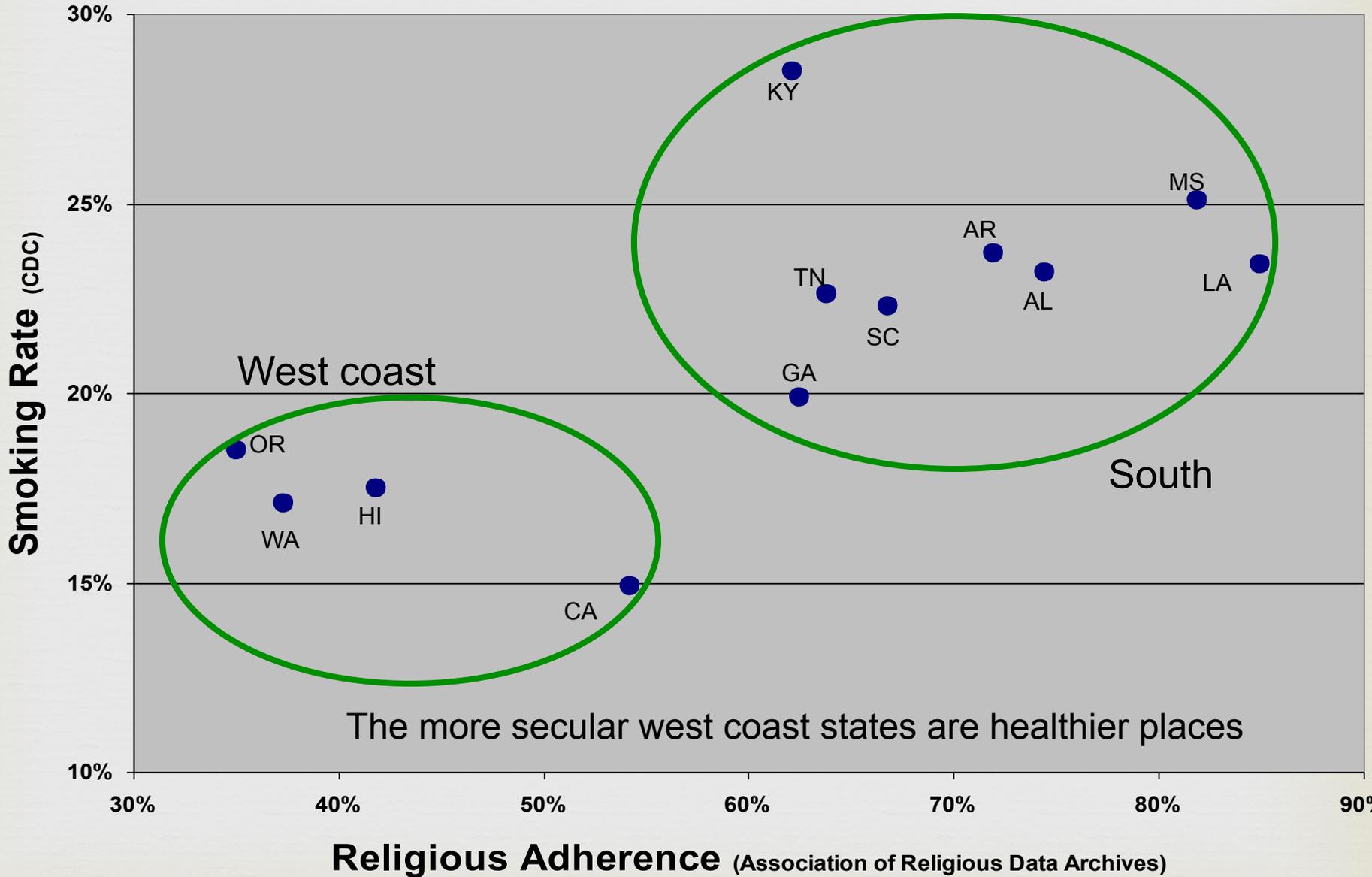


Smoking

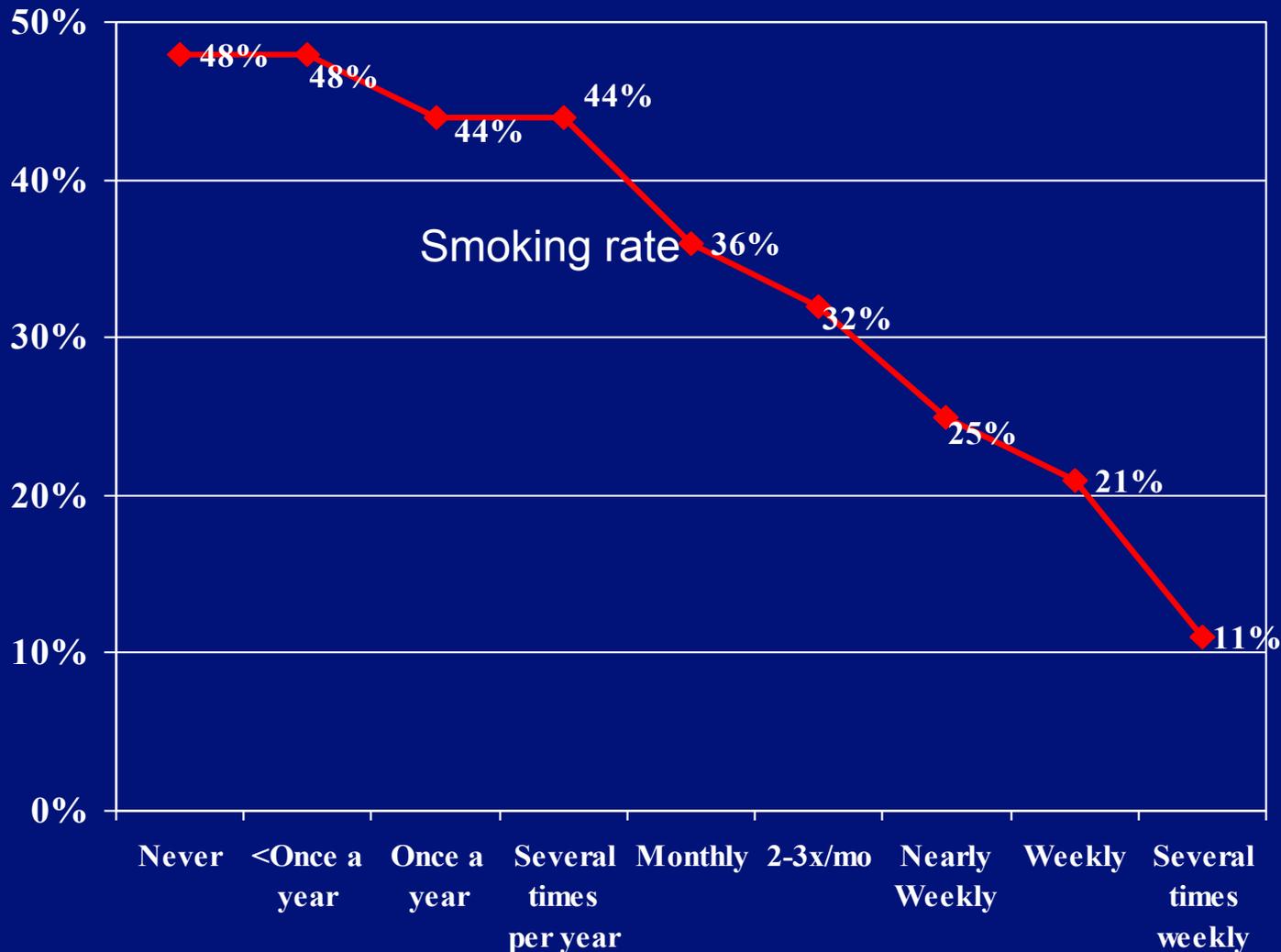


**Religious Attendance, by State
(Gallup, 2008-2009)**

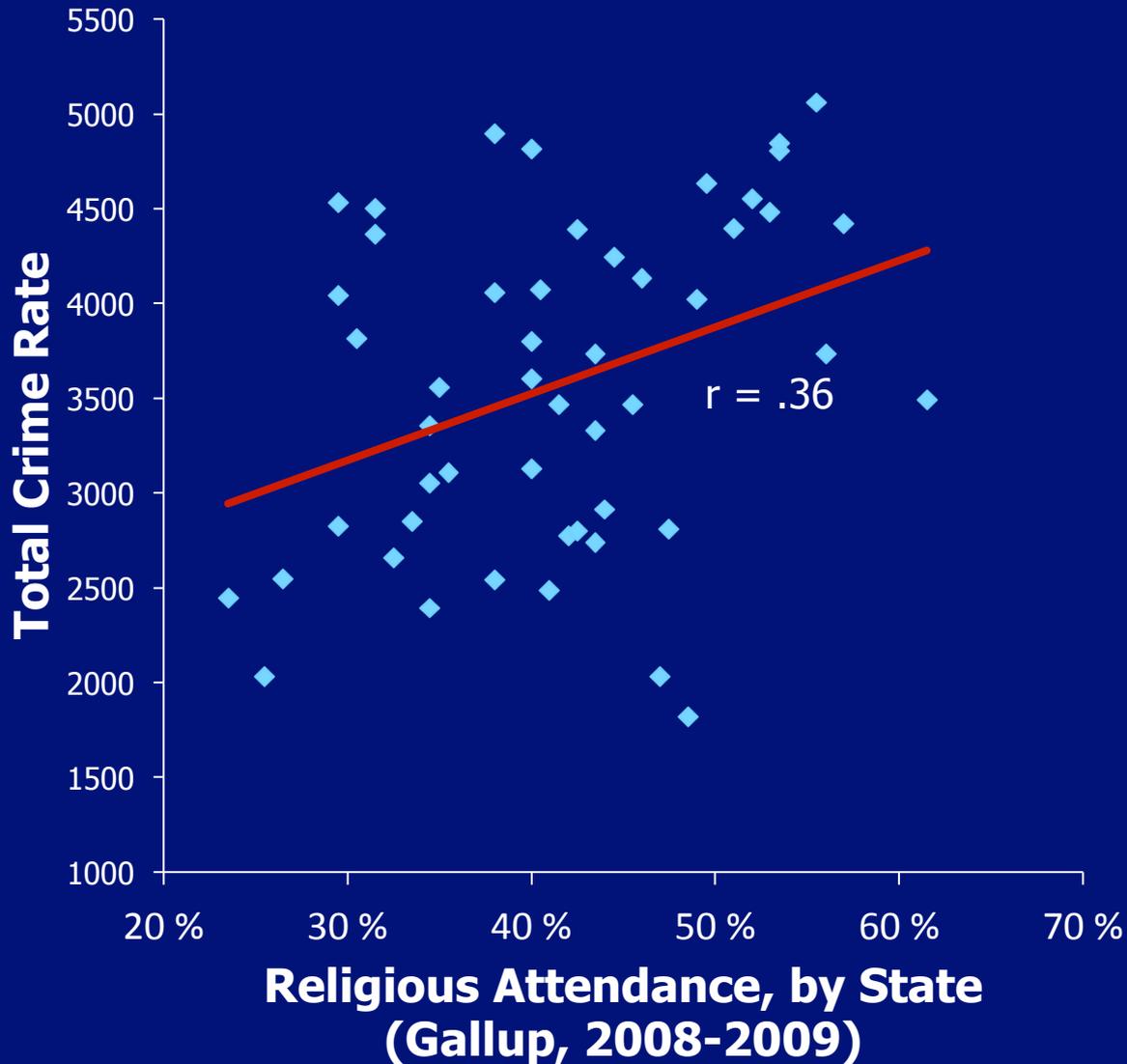
Smoking Rate & Religious Adherence, by State



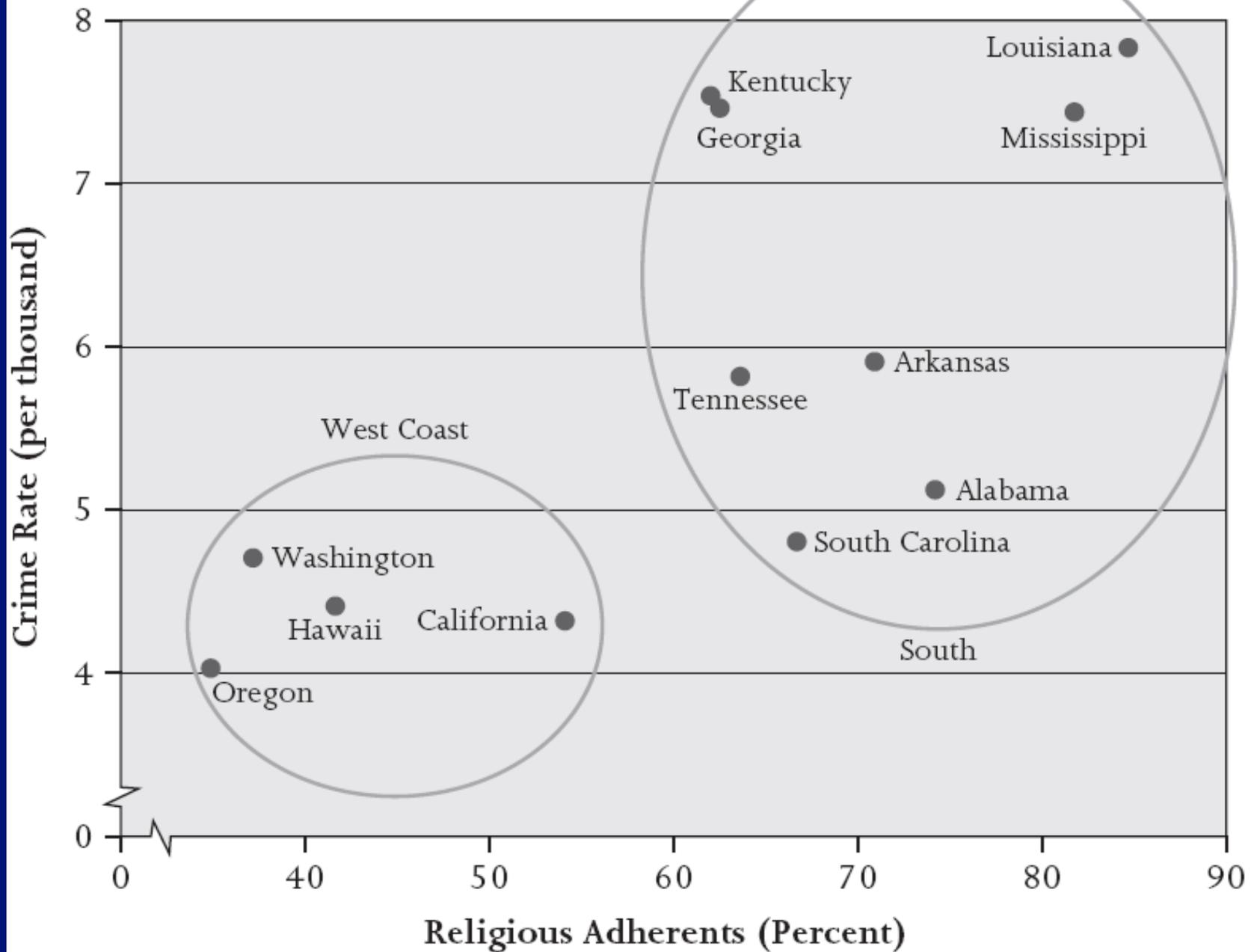
Religious Attendance and Smoking Rate (n=16,2276, NORC, 1972-2010)



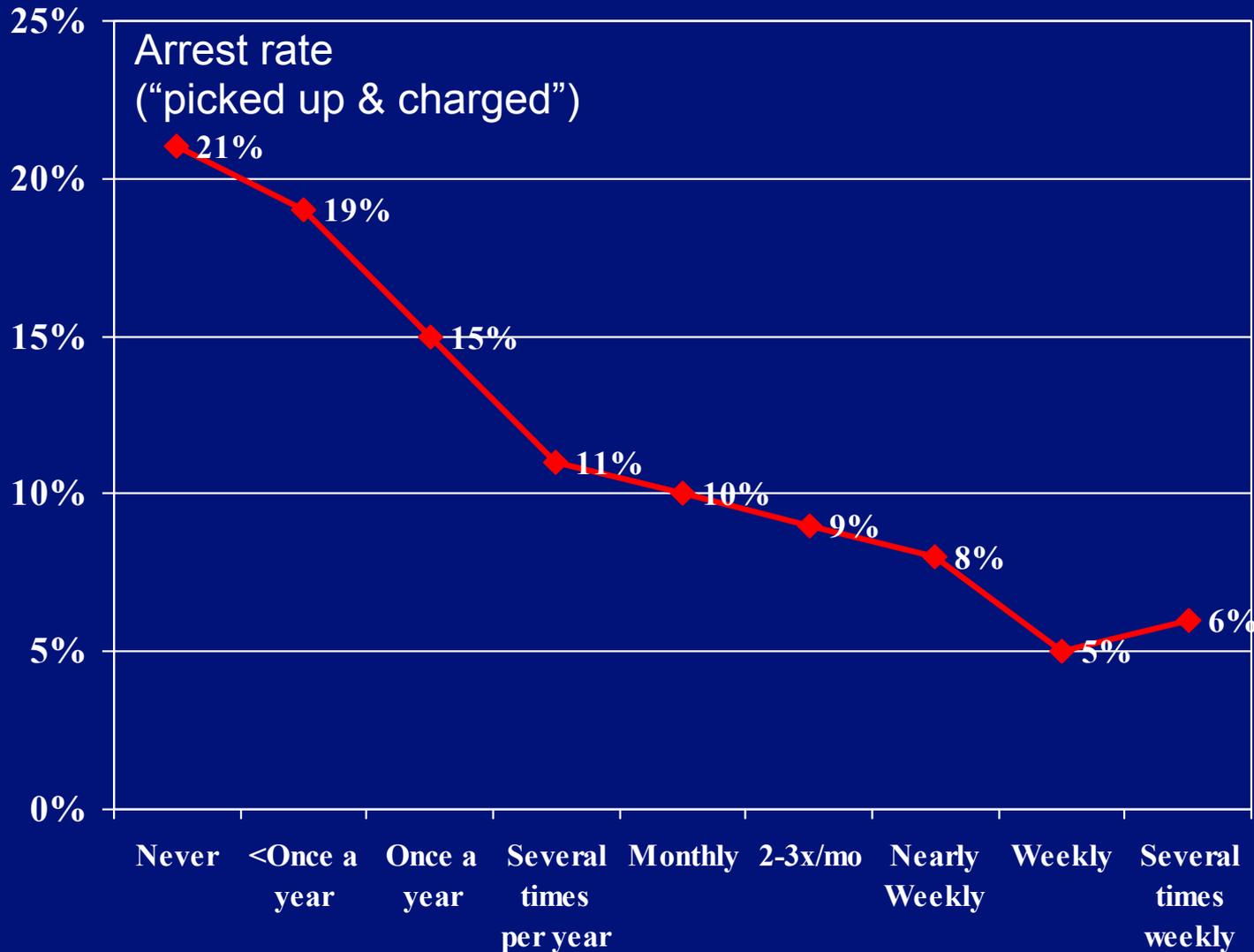
Crime rate



Crime rates

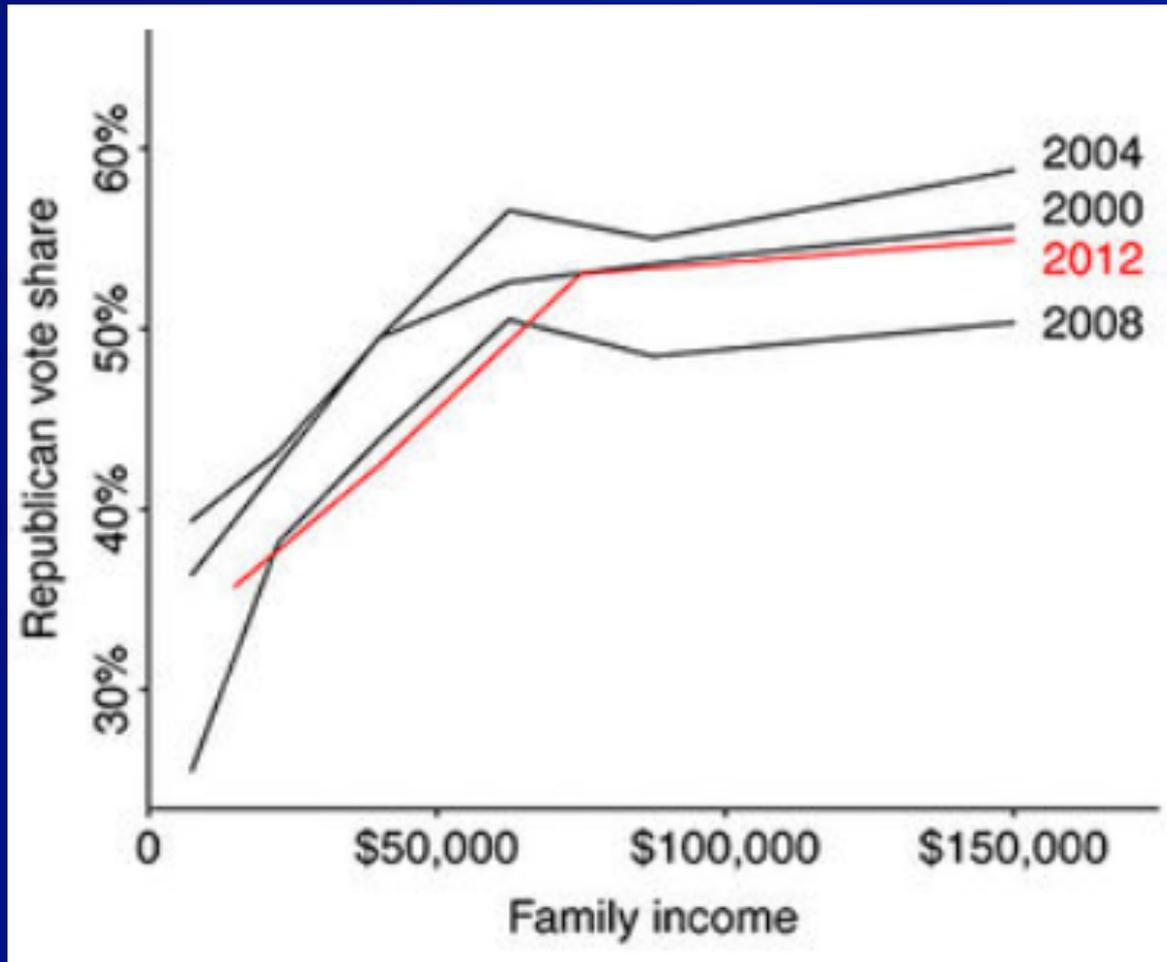


Religious Attendance and Arrest Rate (n=10,535, NORC, 1972-2008)



**What do you suppose:
*Are rich people more likely
to vote Republican or
Democrat?***

High income individuals vote Republican



The wealth and politics paradox:

- *Poor states* and
- *Rich individuals*
- Vote Republican

Conclusions

- Religion has had both perverse and beneficial associations
- Irreligious *countries* and *states* are flourishing (when income/education not controlled)
- But across *individuals*, religiosity correlates with happiness, health, altruism, civility (and marital stability and freedom from teen pregnancy).
- Thus:
 - “Dawkins’ diatribe against religion, however well-intentioned, is . . . deeply misinformed.”
 - ~ Evolutionary biologist (and fellow atheist) David Sloan Wilson