

Article

Religiosity and Life Satisfaction Across Latin America

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Abstract

Although a myriad of cross-national studies featuring European countries, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the United States, and many other nations around the world support the contention that religiosity is associated with life satisfaction (both positively and negatively), comparatively little is known about this association in Latin America, a continent known for its strong Catholic identification, an emerging evangelical influence, and a multitude of indigenous and non-Western religious traditions. Using unique data from 21 Latin American countries, we begin to fill this gap by addressing three previously unanswered questions. What is the association between religiosity and life satisfaction in Latin America? Which measure of religiosity is most frequently associated with life satisfaction in the region: social religiosity (e.g., frequency of service attendance) or individual religiosity (e.g., importance of religion and religious identification)? Do feelings of life satisfaction vary among religious groups in Latin America? First, our aggregate models suggest a positive association between religious importance and life satisfaction and between service attendance and life satisfaction, but the association between religious identity and life satisfaction is negative. Second, our more nuanced cross-country, comparative analysis reveals that the importance of religion to a respondent (individual religiosity) is more frequently (and positively) associated with life satisfaction across a broader array of Latin American countries than service attendance (social religiosity) and religious identity (individual religiosity), with the latter evincing a negative association with life satisfaction in select countries. Lastly, there is a hierarchy of life satisfaction among religious groups. Evangelicals register higher levels of life satisfaction than Catholics, who tend to have similar levels of life satisfaction to Protestants, mainline Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and members of the Jewish faith. However, Catholics enjoy higher levels of life satisfaction than atheists, agnostics, and adherents of indigenous and African religions (e.g., Candomblé, Umbanda, and Voodoo). We discuss the implications of our findings for future research.



Keywords: life satisfaction; individual religiosity; social religiosity; Latin America

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1. Introduction

The systematic study of the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction has proliferated in recent years. There is near-universal consensus across disciplines, over time, and throughout select regions of the world that religion is positively associated with life satisfaction (Ferris 2002; Greeley and Hout 2006; Hadaway 1978; Inglehart 2010). Particularly, the association has been documented in studies based on data from the United States (Ferris 2002; Ellison 1991; Lim and Putnam 2010) and countries throughout Europe

(Clark and Lelkes 2009; Greene and Yoon 2004; Shen and Kogan 2019), Asia (Choirina et al. 2021), Africa (Adeyemo and Adeleye 2008), and Australia (Dorahy et al. 1997). However, there are exceptions to this pattern, in that some studies show little evidence of a positive association between internal dimensions of religiosity and well-being (Lever and Estrada 2016; Okulicz-Kozaryn 2010), while the effect may vary depending on how normative religion is in a particular country (Stavrova et al. 2013). Thus, at best, the research is mixed, with findings largely dependent upon the dimension of religiosity in question and the country under consideration.¹

Consequently, several important gaps remain in the empirical literature. First, save for a small group of studies, comparatively little is known about the association between religion and life satisfaction in Latin America²—a continent known for its strong Catholic identification alongside a variety of indigenous and African influences (De la Torre and Martín 2016). In addition to its high level of religiosity, Latin America is also known for registering higher scores of subjective well-being relative to what its economic level suggests (Inglehart 2009). This is important in the context of prior research showing that religious adherents report higher levels of subjective well-being than their non-religious counterparts (Ferris 2002). Second, the questions of *how* and *why* religion is associated with life satisfaction remain an issue of theoretical and empirical debate (Lim and Putnam 2010). One theory points to the networking feature of social religiosity (e.g., frequency of service attendance) as the key driver of life satisfaction, while another theory focuses on individual religiosity (e.g., importance of religion and religious identification) as the underlying mechanism fueling life satisfaction. While both theories have merit, the question of which dimension of religiosity has the strongest impact on life satisfaction remains unresolved (Lim and Putnam 2010)—especially in the Latin American context. Finally, another understudied issue concerns the extent to which certain religious denominations/organizations express greater levels of life satisfaction than others. While there is some consensus that Protestants (Evangelicals and Pentecostals) express higher levels of life satisfaction than Catholics, Jews, and the non-religious (Ferris 2002; McCullough et al. 2002; Metzl 2009; Ngamaba and Soni 2018; Rozer and Kraaykamp 2013), little is known about whether this pattern extends to the multi-religious continent of Latin America—where Western religions exist alongside, but also intersect with, traditional and indigenous influences (Inglehart 2009).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to begin the process of filling these gaps. We use unique data to perform a comparative analysis of 21 Latin American countries to examine, in each country, (a) the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction, (b) whether social religiosity or individual religiosity has the strongest impact on life satisfaction throughout the region, and (c) whether certain religious organizations/denominations in Latin America experience greater levels of life satisfaction than others. We begin with a review of the literature followed by a description of our data, methods, and results. We conclude with a discussion of our key findings in relation to the extant literature, and we offer several suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Religiosity and Life Satisfaction in Cross-National Perspective

The positive relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction has been well documented in numerous studies featuring individual countries, including Australia (Abu-Rayya et al. 2016), Indonesia (Choirina et al. 2021), Korea (You et al. 2019), the Netherlands (Ten Kate et al. 2017), Nigeria (Adeyemo and Adeleye 2008), Peru (Carranza Esteban et al. 2021), the United Kingdom (Shen and Kogan 2019) and the United States (Chesser et al. 2018; Desmond et al. 2018; Lim and Putnam 2010; Ellison and Gay 1990), just to name a few. Similarly, several cross-national comparative studies featuring dozens of countries

simultaneously confirm the positive religiosity/life satisfaction link (Ngamaba and Soni 2018; Okulicz-Kozaryn 2010; Stavrova et al. 2013). For example, data from the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey show that the positive relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction holds across analyses of many countries (Ngamaba and Soni 2018; Okulicz-Kozaryn 2010; Stavrova et al. 2013), including a small group of Latin American countries discussed below.

2.2. Social Religiosity Versus Individual Religiosity

Beyond establishing the basic relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction, another important line of empirical inquiry seeks to account for *how* and *why* the relationship might exist in the first place. While the precise theoretical mechanisms underlying the relationship are unresolved (Lim and Putnam 2010), two explanations, one rooted in the social aspects of religiosity, the other aimed at the personal or individual aspects of religiosity, dominate the literature. Lim and Putnam's (2010) pivotal study, based on longitudinal data from the U.S., found the frequency of religious service attendance to be the most consistent correlate of subjective well-being (Lim and Putnam 2010, p. 919). They note that the positive impact of religious attendance on subjective well-being is likely a function of the formation of social networks among adherents. However, they are mindful of the fact that their results run contrary to other inquiries that find little direct support for the idea that social religiosity increases life satisfaction (e.g., Ellison et al. 1989; Greeley and Hout 2006).

In contrast, Dilmaghani's (2018) study of Canadian data found that the religiosity dimension of individual belief (private worship) has a stronger impact on well-being than social religiosity (religious attendance). In fact, research shows that other individual dimensions of religiosity, framed as the importance of religion to a person, or having a religious identity (i.e., belonging to a religious denomination), and subjective religiosity, are linked to higher levels of subjective well-being and resilience (Ellison 1991; Greeley and Hout 2006; Green and Elliott 2010; Greenfield and Marks 2007; Koenig et al. 2001; Krause 2003; Laurencelle et al. 2002; Pargament 2002; Watkins et al. 2022).

Okulicz-Kozaryn's analysis of 79 countries reinforces the idea that the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction depends on the measure of religiosity in question. Specifically, results from his aggregated models (all countries combined) showed that social dimensions of religiosity (attending religious services, belonging to a religious organization, and spending time with people at church) are positively associated with life satisfaction. However, the findings undergirding individual dimensions of religiosity were more complex in that both "believe in God" and "belong to a religious denomination" were negatively related to life satisfaction, but the individual indicator of "religion important in life" was positively related to life satisfaction.

The complexity of this research notwithstanding, several consistent findings in the extant literature inform the following hypotheses. We expect:

Hypothesis 1a. *Social religiosity (service attendance) to be positively associated with life satisfaction.*

Moreover, different forms of individual religiosity can yield radically different outcomes. Thus, based on prior literature, we expect:

Hypothesis 1b. *Individual religiosity (importance of religion) to be positively associated with life satisfaction.*

Hypothesis 1c. *Individual religiosity (religious identity) to be negatively associated with life satisfaction.*

2.3. Religiosity and Life Satisfaction in Latin America

As with many regions around the world, religion and spirituality remain a dominant force throughout Latin America. A report from the Pew Research Center revealed that roughly 85% of the population identify as Christian, with many adults in recent years shifting their allegiance from Catholicism to Evangelical and Protestant versions of Christianity (Hackett et al. 2025). At the same time, however, the share of the unaffiliated population in Latin America increased between 2010 and 2020 by 67% (or 5 percentage points), marking the largest change in the religious landscape in recent years (Hackett et al. 2025). Adding to this complexity is the phenomenon of “religious switching” throughout Latin America (e.g., people moving from the religion of their childhood to another religion, or no religion at all). Religious switching accounts for the decline in Catholicism and the rise in Protestantism and the religiously unaffiliated in Latin America (Lesage et al. 2026).

Within this religiously heterogeneous context, comparatively little is known about the association between religiosity and life satisfaction. Some studies have compared Latin America with other countries. For example, Ngamaba and Soni’s (2018) comprehensive study of 79 countries found that “people living in Latin America are happier and more satisfied with their lives than people living in Eastern Europe” (p. 2129). The authors speculated that the strong Roman Catholic and Protestant influence in the region might account for the high levels of life satisfaction relative to Eastern Europe, a region marked by the fall of communism, which they suggest may have left a “spiritual vacuum” (p. 2129). Ngamaba and Soni (2018) also found that religiously Orthodox adherents living in Eastern Europe self-reported noticeably lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction than their Orthodox counterparts living in Latin America—a finding that confirms prior research showing variation across countries in life satisfaction (Kim-Prieto and Diener 2009).

The few Latin American studies that have examined this issue may be divided between research based on single countries (e.g., Chile, Peru, and Mexico) and large cross-national studies in which Latin America is a secondary focus. Saintila et al. (2024) are representative of the former. The authors examined the association between religiosity and life satisfaction among a group of Peruvian university students using a continuous measure of religiosity. They found religiosity to be positively and significantly associated with life satisfaction, suggesting that Peruvian students who reported high levels of religiosity tended to have higher levels of life satisfaction relative to students with lower levels of religiosity. Similarly, Paez et al.’s (2017) analysis of data from Chile revealed a weak positive and statistically significant association between public religiosity and life satisfaction, but no association was found between private religiosity and life satisfaction. By contrast, Lever and Estrada’s (2016) analysis of data from Mexico showed little evidence that religiosity was a consistent predictor of subjective well-being.

When it comes to large cross-national studies with data that include samples from Latin America, we also find inconsistent results concerning the religiosity/life satisfaction link. Okulicz-Kozaryn’s (2010) comprehensive analysis of 79 nations using World Values Survey data included four Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Colombia). He confirmed that the effect of religiosity varies by country. On the whole, he noted, religiosity makes people happier; however, there is a negative dimension as well, indicating that some forms of individual religiosity can actually make people unhappy (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2010). Stavrova et al. (2013) showed that the effect is strong and positive in so-called “religious countries”—or countries where religion is normative and dominant—where negative attitudes toward non-believers prevail. Specifically, the authors revealed a positive association between social religiosity (e.g., service attendance) and life satisfaction in Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru. They also found individual religiosity (e.g., importance of God and personal religiosity) to be positively associated

with life satisfaction in Brazil, Mexico and Peru, but only importance of God was positively associated with life satisfaction in Chile.

The mixed nature of this research suggests the need for further inquiry. Particularly, the literature awaits a more comprehensive analysis of Latin America, a continent with generally high levels of diverse religiosity along with adjacent factors that are typically associated with religiosity (e.g., poverty). Given the vast heterogeneity in religious expression throughout Latin America, the recent increase in the share of respondents who self-identify as religiously unaffiliated, not to mention cross-country variation in the kind of secular, social, political and economic forces that can influence religiosity, it is likely that the effect of social versus individual religiosity varies by country.

Thus, we offer the first comprehensive examination of Latin American countries. The extant literature informs competing hypotheses regarding the predictive impact of social religiosity versus individual religiosity. Some literature (Lim and Putnam 2010; Stavrova et al. 2013) informs the expectation that:

Hypothesis 2a. *Social religiosity (attendance) will have more of a positive impact on life satisfaction across a broader array of Latin American countries than individual religiosity.*

However, other research, with multiple measures of individual religiosity (Ellison 1991; Dilmaghani 2018; Greeley and Hout 2006; Green and Elliott 2010; Greenfield and Marks 2007; Koenig et al. 2001; Krause 2003; Laurencelle et al. 2002; Pargament 2002; Watkins et al. 2022), suggests that:

Hypothesis 2b. *Importance of religion (individual religiosity) will have more of a positive impact on life satisfaction across a broader array of Latin American countries than social religiosity.*

In addition, and in contrast to Hypothesis 2b, Okulicz-Kozaryn's (2010) comprehensive analysis of 79 countries suggest that other forms of individual religiosity (belief in God or belonging to a religious denomination) are negatively related to life satisfaction. Thus, as a counterhypothesis to Hypothesis 2b, it is plausible that:

Hypothesis 2c. *Individual religiosity (religious identity) will have more of a negative influence on life satisfaction across a broader array of Latin American countries than social religiosity.*

2.4. Religiosity and Life Satisfaction Across Religious Groups

Another important line of inquiry in the empirical literature explores the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction across religious groups (Ferris 2002; McCullough et al. 2002; Metzl 2009; Ngamaba and Soni 2018; Rozer and Kraaykamp 2013). Prior studies are largely parochial in their analytical approach, focusing mainly on a single country or a single religion (e.g., Christianity) at a time. Some studies report that Protestants (Evangelicals and Pentecostals) express higher levels of life satisfaction than Catholics, Jews, and the non-religious (Ferris 2002; McCullough et al. 2002; Metzl 2009; Rozer and Kraaykamp 2013).

Using data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Survey, Ngamaba and Soni (2018, p. 2122) examined variability in life satisfaction (and happiness) among Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Christians, other religions, and the non-religious. Among other things, they found Protestants, Buddhists and Roman Catholics to be more satisfied and happier with their lives than other religious groups. Within Christianity, the authors noted, Protestants and Catholics were found to have equal levels of satisfaction, with self-described Orthodox adherents exhibiting the lowest feelings of subjective well-being and happiness.

In a longitudinal analysis of Dutch data, [Ten Kate et al. \(2017\)](#) found that Muslims exhibited lower levels of life satisfaction than the non-religious, and while the Protestant/life satisfaction association was non-existent, Catholics exhibited significantly higher levels of life satisfaction than the non-religious, a finding the authors attributed to the social or “belonging” (e.g., religious attendance) dimension of religiosity more so than the individual or “believing” (meaning and worldview) dimension.

Additional research shows that Protestants in the United States register higher levels of happiness and well-being than Catholics and Jews ([Ferris 2002](#)). In fact, Protestant Evangelicals experience “positive emotions at a high intensity compared to Christian Catholics” ([McCullough et al. 2002](#); [Metzl 2009](#)). However, [Dilmaghani’s \(2018\)](#) analysis of Canadian data showed little difference between Catholics and Protestants in the effect of religiosity on subjective well-being. Other studies show that Buddhists and Christians exhibit higher levels of subjective well-being than the non-religious and people of other religions ([Rozer and Kraaykamp 2013](#)).

Since frequency of prayer and frequency of religious service attendance are related to feelings of life satisfaction, it is important to note that these practices vary by religious groups in Latin America. For example, analyses of recent Latin American data report that Protestants are more likely than Catholics to pray daily and attend religious services weekly ([Lesage et al. 2026](#)).

Thus, while there is ample evidence that feelings of life satisfaction vary by religious group, how these relationships play out in Latin America has garnered relatively little attention. To our knowledge, this study provides the first comprehensive analysis of whether feelings of life satisfaction vary by religious group. Mixed findings from prior research, and scant attention to Latin America, make it difficult to develop formal hypotheses. However, what little we do know informs our final two hypotheses. We expect that:

Hypothesis 3a. *Protestants (Evangelicals) throughout Latin America will report higher levels of life satisfaction than their Catholic counterparts.*

Hypothesis 3b. *Adherents of traditional religions, native religions, and non-believers (indigenous and African religions, the unaffiliated, atheists, agnostics) will report lower levels of life satisfaction than their Catholic counterparts.*

3. Data and Methods

To examine the effects of religiosity on life satisfaction, we use unique data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), which surveys 26 nations across North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean every two years. Data on religiosity and life satisfaction are available from 2010 to 2016/2017 for 21 Latin American countries (see [Appendix A](#)). The LAPOP was designed to enable cross-national and cross-cultural comparison of values and norms on a variety of topics, including religiosity. The combined sample has 138,410 observations. The sample sizes depicted in our tables vary due to missing data. In some countries, our more elaborate models also contain missing data, which may weigh against representativeness. All variables are defined in [Appendices B and C](#).

3.1. Dependent Variable

Our main outcome variable is life satisfaction, a self-reported indicator known to correspond with objective measures of well-being ([Dolan et al. 2017](#)). Respondents were asked: *In general, how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say that you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied?* Answers are coded as 1 = “very dissatisfied,” 2 = “somewhat dissatisfied,” 3 = “somewhat satisfied,” and 4 = “very satisfied.”

3.2. Focal Predictors

3.2.1. Two Dimensions of Religiosity

There are multiple dimensions of religiosity. We examine two measures of religiosity drawn from prior research: *social* and *individual religiosity*. *Social religiosity* refers to social interaction, such as attending religious services, spending time with people at church and belonging to a religious organization. *Individual religiosity* refers to one's personal interaction with God, such as, having a feeling of individual closeness with the divine through prayer, belief, and communion; believing in the importance of God and religion, having a religious identity, and being religious. There are three variables in the LAPOP survey that allow us to measure religiosity: the variable *attend*, a proxy for social religiosity as measured by a respondent's frequency of religious service attendance; and two variables that tap into individual religiosity, *importance of religion* to the individual and whether the respondent *has a religion, or not*, with the latter serving as a proxy for a person's religious identity and specific religious affiliation with a denomination. The LAPOP asks, "Do you have a religion, if any?" and, if the respondent says yes, surveyors probe for the specific denomination.³ This measure does not necessarily capture social interaction or engagement because denomination membership can be nominal (e.g., "I am Catholic"), with no group involvement or no religious service attendance. Hence, we view it as a measure of individual religiosity because it likely taps into a respondent's sense of belonging more than their degree of religious involvement. By comparison, this variable is very similar to Okulicz-Kozaryn's (2010) individual measure of "belong to a religious denomination," a variable that was found to have a negative influence on life satisfaction.⁴ A detailed description of all variable coding may be found in Appendices B and C.

3.2.2. Controls

We follow Welch et al. (2007) and control for the usual demographics such as age, age²,⁵ gender (female), education, race⁶ (White), married, and urban residency. We include a dummy variable for Catholics in our full model to account for denominational differences that may shape religious practice and attitudes. We also control for political ideology (e.g., conservative), because, as some observers note, "the contemporary reality of Latin America seems to be that the societal and the political spheres cannot be disassociated from religion" (De la Torre and Martín 2016, p. 474). We also control for socio-economic status (SES) by including measures of employment status and wealth, since SES is associated with religiosity (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Barro and McCleary 2003; Iannaccone 1998). Higher social class is positively associated with religious service attendance but negatively associated with prayer (Chaves 2011; Schwadel 2011). Controlling for socio-economic status therefore helps ensure that the estimated relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction is not driven by an unobserved aspect of social class.

The relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction is likely to vary cross-nationally given the immense heterogeneity in religious expression across the region. Thus, one of our chief contributions lies in our cross-national comparison of the effects of religiosity on life satisfaction within each of the 21 Latin American countries we observe. See Appendix D for all descriptive statistics.

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) to analyze the data. Although OLS assumes cardinality of the outcome variable, and life satisfaction is clearly an ordinal variable, it is an appropriate estimation method to use in this case. Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004) showed that the results are substantially the same as those from discrete models, and OLS has become the default method in happiness research (Blanchflower and Oswald 2011). Theoretically, while there is still debate about the cardinality of subjective well-being, there are strong arguments for treating it as a cardinal variable (Ng 1996, 1997, 2011).

Nonetheless, as a robustness check, we also generated logit regressions. The results of this procedure yielded the same substantive conclusions (available upon request). All continuous variables were standardized prior to estimation. Models include country and year fixed effects. Coefficients are therefore interpretable as standardized effects (β). Survey weights and design-based standard errors were applied (LAPOP 2025). To account for the sampling approach used in the survey data collection, weights and design effects were accounted for in the analyses. Also, to ensure correct standard errors and confidence intervals, analyses were adjusted for the following design features: strata (variable STRATA), primary sampling units (variable UPM), per LAPOP instructions.

4. Results

We first examine the correlation between our religiosity variables and life satisfaction in our aggregated sample of 21 countries (Table 1). The measures of religiosity correlate moderately between 0.3 and 0.4. As expected, there is a positive relationship between attending religious services and being a member of a religious organization and the belief that religion is important. We also find a weak but positive relationship between life satisfaction and all religiosity variables. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table 1. The association of religiosity and life satisfaction across Latin America.

	Attend	Religion Important	Religious Identity	Life Satisfaction
Attend	1.00	.	.	.
Religion Important	0.4991 ***	1.00	.	.
Religious Identity	0.3697 ***	0.4511 ***	1.00	.
Life Satisfaction	0.0192 ***	0.0475 ***	0.0116 ***	1.00

Note: Pairwise correlation matrix. *** $p < 0.001$. Source: (LAPOP Lab 2010–2016/2017).

Next, we turn to the OLS regression analysis. As a baseline, we begin with a discussion of our aggregate analysis (all countries combined) of the association between religiosity and life satisfaction, controlling for all background factors (Table 2), an approach that mirrors prior research (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2010). We then present the results of our more nuanced country-by-country analysis with statistical controls, depicting, for the first time, as far as we know, important variation between countries in the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction net of all background measures (Table 3). We conclude with a novel analysis of religious group differences in life satisfaction across Latin America (Table 4).

Table 2 displays the results of our tests of Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c with data aggregated across the entire continent. In support of Hypothesis 1a, the results show that social religiosity, in the form of service attendance, has a positive and statistically significant effect on life satisfaction (attendance, $\beta = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$, models 4 and 5), net of all background factors. Similarly, individual religiosity, framed as “importance of religion” to the individual, is also positive and statistically significant, supporting Hypothesis 1b. Importantly, this form of individual religiosity has a stronger, positive (statistically significant, $\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$, models 4 and 5) effect on life satisfaction than service attendance, even when controlling for other measures of religiosity and all background factors. However, consistent with prior research, our data show that different types of individual religiosity yield different outcomes; that is, instead of increasing life satisfaction, some forms of individual religiosity are negatively associated with life satisfaction (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2010). For example, and in support of Hypothesis 1c, our results show that religious identity (whether a person has a religion or not) has a weak and negative association with life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.02$, $p < 0.01$, model 5). This suggests that merely identifying with a religion is not associated with higher life satisfaction and might even be slightly detrimental to it. Further,

Table 2 shows that religious identity has the same negative impact on life satisfaction as living in an urban area (model 4 and 5).

Table 2. The effects of social religiosity versus individual religiosity on life satisfaction. OLS regression of life satisfaction. BETA (fully standardized).

	Model 1 Beta	Model 2 Beta	Model 3 Beta	Model 4 Beta	Model 5 Beta
Attendance	0.04 ***	0.02 ***	0.02 ***	0.03 ***	0.03 ***
Religious importance		0.04 ***	0.04 ***	0.06 ***	0.06 ***
Religious identity			−0.01 **	−0.01 **	−0.02 **
Age				−0.34 ***	−0.34 ***
age ²				0.29 ***	0.29 ***
Female				−0.00	−0.00
Education				0.04 ***	0.04 ***
White				0.01 **	0.01 **
Married				0.03 ***	0.03 ***
Wealth				0.10 ***	0.10 ***
Conservative				0.03 ***	0.03 ***
Urban				−0.02 ***	−0.02 ***
Employed				0.03 ***	0.03 ***
Catholic					0.00
_cons	−0.03	−0.02	−0.02	−0.00	−0.00
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	102,045	101,295	99,216	81,153	81,153

Note: The main independent variables are in bold. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Source: (LAPOP Lab 2010–2016/2017).

Several other interesting findings in Table 2 are worth reporting. For example, attending religious services has a similar positive association with life satisfaction as marital status and employment status (model 4 and 5). Said differently, the benefits to life satisfaction that accrue by attending religious services (social religiosity) are like the benefits that flow from being married and having a job. Lastly, the results in Table 2 indicate that the importance of religion to a respondent has a larger positive effect on life satisfaction than race and education. Having found strong support for our first three hypotheses, we now turn to the question of whether the above findings are sustained across different Latin American countries.

Table 3 presents the results of our country-by-country analysis, which include tests of Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c. Table 3 displays fully standardized betas, meaning they show the relative strength of the association between three indicators of religiosity and life satisfaction on the same scale. To our knowledge, this is the first time such an analysis has been conducted with data from Latin America. The importance of this approach is that it allows us to compare the magnitude of the impact of each dimension of religiosity on life satisfaction across each country, net of all statistical controls. In doing so, Table 3 sheds new light on the complex association between religiosity and life satisfaction in Latin America.

Table 3 shows that there are only two countries in which there is no statistically significant relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction: Brazil and Guyana. For the remaining 19 countries, a statistically significant relationship is present—further underscoring the important connection between religiosity and life satisfaction throughout the region.

When it comes to the question of which dimension of religiosity is likely to have the greatest effect in the most countries in Latin America, prior literature informed competing hypotheses, with some research predicting that social religiosity, in the form of attendance at religious services, should have a broader, positive association across the region than individual religiosity (Hypothesis 2a). However, other studies suggest that individual

religiosity, framed as “importance of religion”, may have a broader, positive effect than social religiosity (Hypothesis 2b), while other measures of individual religiosity (religious identity) are likely to be negatively associated with life satisfaction across a larger array of Latin American countries than other dimensions of religiosity.

First, the data support Hypothesis 2b. That is, individual religiosity (importance of religion) has more of a positive effect on life satisfaction across a broader array of Latin American countries than social religiosity. As shown in Table 3, the association between religiosity and life satisfaction varies by dimension of religiosity and across Latin American countries. A full 14 of 21 (67%) countries report a positive relationship between our first individual dimension of religiosity (importance of religion to the respondent) and life satisfaction (column 2). This compares to the association between social religiosity (service attendance), where only nine of twenty-one (43%) countries evince an association, with eight of the nine countries displaying a positive relationship, while one of the twenty-one countries reveal a negative association (Panama) (column 1). Second, our test of Hypothesis 2c appears in column 3 of Table 3. Religious identity, our second individual measure of religiosity, shows the weakest relationship to life satisfaction, with only four of twenty-one (19%) countries showing a statistically significant association. Importantly, the results reveal that religious identity has a negative influence on life satisfaction, as Hypothesis 2c predicts, but this is only evident in four countries: Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay and Jamaica.

Thus, when examined country by country, individual religiosity, as measured by the importance of religion to the respondent, is more positively and statistically associated with life satisfaction than our social dimension of religiosity.

Table 3. Effects of religiosity on life satisfaction—OLS. Beta (fully standardized). (LAPOP Lab 2010–2016/2017).

Country	Social Religiosity (Religious Service Attendance)	Individual Religiosity (Importance of Religion)	Individual Religiosity (Religious Identity)
Mexico (n = 3853)	−0.02	0.09 ***	0.00
Guatemala (n = 3475)	−0.00	0.13 ***	0.01
El Salvador (n = 4020)	0.05 *	0.03	−0.01
Honduras (n = 3726)	0.01	0.14 ***	−0.02
Nicaragua (n = 3864)	0.06 **	0.04	−0.02
Costa Rica (n = 3058)	0.01	0.06 **	0.02
Panama (n = 3862)	− 0.03 *	0.03 *	0.04
Colombia (n = 4891)	0.01	0.04 **	0.00
Ecuador (n = 4302)	0.06 **	0.08 **	− 0.06 *
Bolivia (n = 5850)	0.04	0.07 ***	−0.02
Peru (n = 4761)	0.04 *	0.06 **	−0.01
Paraguay (n = 3062)	0.04	0.06 **	− 0.07 *
Chile (n = 3836)	0.06 **	0.05 **	0.00
Uruguay (n = 3935)	0.07 ***	−0.01	− 0.04 *
Brazil (n = 4185)	0.04	0.04	0.01
Venezuela (n = 3804)	0.00	0.07 **	−0.00
Argentina (n = 3353)	−0.03	0.07 **	−0.04
Dom. Republic (n = 3637)	0.05 **	0.04	−0.01
Haiti (n = 4285)	0.06	0.10 ***	−0.02
Jamaica (n = 3352)	0.07 **	0.04	− 0.04 *
Guyana (n = 2042)	0.01	0.06	0.07

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. Note: Control variables include age, age-squared, female, education, White, marital status, wealth, Catholic, conservative, urban, employed and year. Bold print indicates statistically significant coefficients.

Finally, we turn our attention to whether the association between religiosity and life satisfaction varies across religious groups. The empirical literature suggests that Protestants (Evangelicals) have higher levels of life satisfaction than Catholics (Hypothesis 3a), while

Catholics have higher levels of life satisfaction than adherents of traditional and native religions and non-believers (Hypothesis 3b). While these patterns prevail in the U.S., Europe, and other regions around the world, surprisingly little attempt has been made to examine the relationship in Latin America. Consistent with prior literature (Ferris 2002; McCullough et al. 2002; Metzl 2009), and in support of Hypothesis 3a, the results displayed in Table 4 reveal that Evangelicals (Pentecostals) (0.0213, $p < 0.01$, model 2) register higher levels of life satisfaction than Catholics⁷ (reference category). Catholics are also less satisfied with their lives than adherents of non-Christian Eastern religions, i.e., Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, Confucianists, and members of the Baha'i faith (0.136, $p < 0.001$, model 2). However, Catholics tend to be on par with Protestants (mainline and non-Evangelical) and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as members of the Jewish and Mormon faiths, when it comes to levels of life satisfaction.

There is also evidence to support Hypothesis 3b. When compared to traditional and native religious groups, and non-believers throughout Latin America, Catholics register higher levels of life satisfaction. Specifically, Catholics are more satisfied with life than followers of indigenous and African religions (-0.0956 , $p < 0.01$, model 2) (e.g., adherents of Candomblé, Voodoo, Rastafarian, Mayan, Umbanda, Maria Lanza, Inti, Kardecist, Santo Daime, and Esterica), those who believe in a supreme being but have no religious affiliation (-0.0431 , $p < 0.001$, model 2), and non-believers (agnostics and atheists) (-0.0729 , $p < 0.001$, model 2).

Thus, as depicted in Figure 1, there appears to be a hierarchy of feelings of life satisfaction among religious groups in Latin America. Catholics are less sanguine about life than most Western and Eastern religious groups and have similar levels of life satisfaction to Protestants, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of the Jewish and Mormon faiths. However, Catholics are more satisfied with life than native and indigenous religious adherents and non-believers throughout the region.

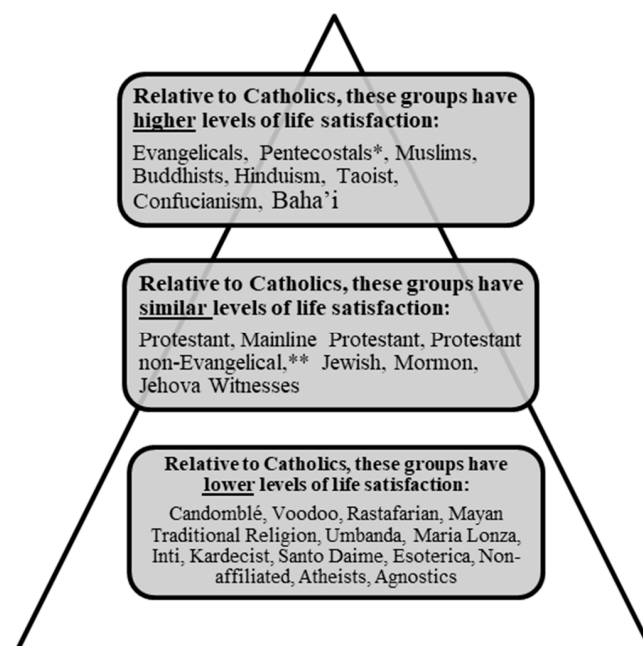


Figure 1. Hierarchy of feelings of life satisfaction by religious group across 21 Latin American countries with Catholics as the comparison group (Visual representation of results from Table 4).

* Evangelicals and Pentecostals comprise Church of God, Assemblies of God, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, Christ Pentecostal Church, Christian Congregation, Mennonite, Brethren, Christian Reformed Church, Charismatic Non-Catholic, Light of the World, Baptist, Nazarene, Salvation Army, Adventist, Seventh-day Adventist, and Sara Nossa Terra. ** Protestant Evangelicals comprise Christian, Calvinist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, Anglican, Episcopalian, and Moravian.

Table 4. Life satisfaction by religious denomination. OLS regressions.

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Religious denomination (Ref = Catholic)		
Protestant	0.00138 (0.00975)	−0.00391 (0.0107)
Non-Christian Eastern religion	0.139 *** (0.0232)	0.136 *** (0.0259)
None, but believes in a supreme being	− 0.0394 *** (0.00881)	− 0.0431 *** (0.00951)
Evangelical	0.0115 (0.00699)	0.0213 ** (0.00762)
Mormon	0.0408 (0.0283)	0.00296 (0.0313)
Traditional or native religion	− 0.0846 ** (0.0296)	− 0.0956 ** (0.0304)
Spiritism—Kardecist	0.0219 (0.0831)	−0.0363 (0.0910)
Jewish	0.0210 (0.0667)	0.0133 (0.0687)
Agnostic or atheists	− 0.0343 + (0.0194)	− 0.0729 *** (0.0193)
Jehovah’s Witness	−0.0360 (0.0242)	−0.0466 + (0.0281)
Other	0.00632 (0.0274)	−0.00398 (0.0285)
Constant	3.220 *** (0.0143)	3.496 *** (0.0243)
Observations	133,416	107,974
R-squared	0.085	0.110
Controls	No	Yes
Year and country dummies	Yes	Yes

Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, and + $p < 0.10$. Bold print indicates statistically significant coefficients. Source: (LAPOP Lab 2010–2016/2017).

5. Discussion

While there is a cross-national consensus that religion is associated with life satisfaction, surprisingly little effort has been made to examine the relationship in Latin America—a continent known for its strong Catholic identification, an emerging evangelical influence, and a multitude of indigenous and non-Western religious traditions. We used unique data from 21 Latin American countries to address three previously unanswered questions. What is the association between religiosity and life satisfaction in Latin America? Which measure of religiosity is most frequently associated with life satisfaction in the region: social religiosity (e.g., frequency of service attendance) or individual religiosity (e.g., importance of religion *and* religious identification)? Do feelings of life satisfaction vary among religious groups in Latin America? Our answers to these questions significantly add to prior research.

First, our aggregated models that consider all 21 countries in our data reveal that there is a statistically significant association between religiosity and life satisfaction, net of all controls, but it depends on the measure of religiosity in question. That is, consistent with prior research, attending religious services *and* the importance of religion to an individual have a positive and statistically significant effect on life satisfaction. But not all forms of individual religiosity displayed the same association with life satisfaction. For example, our second measure of individual religiosity, religious identity, which taps into whether a person has a religion or not, is negatively associated with life satisfaction, suggesting that mere identification with a religion may be problematic for subjective well-being. This finding is consistent with

conclusions drawn by Okulicz-Kozaryn (2010), who found that while religiosity can make people happier overall, some forms of individual religiosity can make people unhappy.⁸

Our main contribution to the literature is our cross-national comparative analysis of 21 Latin American countries. By examining the relationship between religion and life satisfaction in individual Latin American countries that have their own unique religious identity and socio-economic context, we show that the relationship is more nuanced than previously reported. In particular, the results show that forms of religiosity are positively associated with life satisfaction in 19 of the 21 countries we observe. The two exceptions reveal no statistically significant effect in Brazil and Guyana.

Also, when it comes to explaining *how* and *why* religiosity influences life satisfaction, the results of our disaggregated (country-by-country) analysis show that individual religiosity, particularly, importance of religion to the individual, is more strongly related to life satisfaction than social religiosity. That is, the coefficients are statistically significant and positive in 14 of the 21 countries we examined, while social religiosity, measured as frequency of religious service attendance, is only positive and statistically significant in 8 of 21 countries. However, when individual religiosity is measured as “religious identity,” none of the countries we analyze evince a positive and statistically significant relationship with life satisfaction. Moreover, in four countries (Ecuador, Paraguay, Jamaica, and Uruguay), the relationship between religious identity and life satisfaction is negative and statistically significant. This nuanced finding is consistent with prior research, and it further underscores the fact that different dimensions of religiosity can produce radically different outcomes even if they purport to tap into similar, self-identified indicators of religion. That is, our study shows that the individual dimensions of “importance of religion” and “religious identity” are empirically distinct concepts (e.g., one has a positive influence, the other a negative influence, on religiosity).⁹ This finding has important implications for studies with data limitations that allow for the analysis of only one of these dimensions. Such a limited analysis would paint an incomplete picture of the relationship between individual religiosity and life satisfaction.

Third, when the question turns to whether life satisfaction varies by religious group, the answer is often complex and dependent on two factors: the group in question and the country under consideration. While prior research suggests that people in Latin America express higher levels of life satisfaction than their Eastern European counterparts (Ngamaba and Soni 2018), very little is known about how these relationships play out across Latin America. Since Catholics are the largest religious group in Latin America, we used them as our comparison group. We found a hierarchy of life satisfaction depicting Catholics with lower levels of life satisfaction than Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, Confucianists, and members of the Baha’i faith. Moreover, our results are consistent with prior reports suggesting that Catholics have similar levels of life satisfaction as Protestants (Ngamaba and Soni 2018), particularly mainline Protestants and non-Evangelical Protestants, but also Jewish believers, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Further, as with prior research (Ten Kate et al. 2017), we find that Catholics have higher levels of life satisfaction than atheists, agnostics, the non-affiliated, and adherents of indigenous and African religions (e.g., Candomblé, Umbanda, and Voodoo).

As important as these findings are, several limitations should be kept in mind. First, our use of cross-sectional data prevents us from making definitive causal inferences. While we found that various dimensions of religiosity (individual and social) are positively associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, it is plausible to assume that people who are satisfied with life are more likely to be religious. We cannot resolve that issue with our data. However, it is important to note that research based on longitudinal data tends to support the notion that the causal direction runs from religiosity to psychological well-being, instead of the opposite direction (Childs 2010; Headey et al. 2010; Lim and

Putnam 2010). Future studies employing a longitudinal design could shed light on changes over time and causal relationships among the variables used in our study. Second, data limitations restrict us to only one indicator of social religiosity (frequency of religious service attendance) and two indicators of individual religiosity (importance of religion *and* religious identity). While there are many social and individual measures of religiosity (Lim and Putnam 2010), we were pleased to find that, in addition to the novel contributions we add to the literature, the basic patterns we discovered in Latin America are consistent with those found in studies based on data derived from other parts of the world. Still, even with our contributions, more systematic cross-national comparative studies of Latin America are needed. We have only touched the tip of the proverbial iceberg. We encourage the collection of more in-depth longitudinal data that tap into multiple dimensions of religiosity and life satisfaction in as many countries as possible.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Latin American countries in the analyses. Source: (LAPOP Lab 2010–2016/2017).

Country	Sample Size
Mexico	6220
Guatemala	6065
El Salvador	6110
Honduras	6445
Nicaragua	6332
Costa Rica	6049
Panama	6185
Colombia	6077
Ecuador	7534
Bolivia	10,804
Peru	7147
Paraguay	6043
Chile	6732
Uruguay	6038
Brazil	7014
Venezuela	6058
Argentina	5962
Dominican Republic	6050
Haiti	7321
Jamaica	6022
Guyana	6202
TOTAL	138,410

Appendix B

Description of dependent variable and main independent variables.

Variable	Survey Question
Life Satisfaction	To begin, in general how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say that you are (1) very satisfied, (2) Somewhat satisfied, (3) Somewhat dissatisfied, (4) very dissatisfied
Social Religiosity	
Attend religious services	How often do you attend religious services? (1) More than once a week, (2) Once per week (3) Once a month (4) Once or twice a year (5) Never or almost never
Individual Religiosity	
Religion is important in life	Please, could you tell me how important is religion in your life? Very important, rather important, not very important, not at all important.
Religious identity	What is your religion, if any? (1) Catholic. (2) Protestant, Mainline Protestant or Protestant non-Evangelical (Christian; Calvinist; Lutheran; Methodist; Presbyterian; Disciple of Christ; Anglican; Episcopalian; Moravian). (3) Non-Christian Eastern Religions (Islam; Buddhist; Hinduism; Taoist; Confucianism; Baha'i). (4) None (Believes in a Supreme Entity but does not belong to any religion) (5) Evangelical and Pentecostal (Evangelical; Pentecostals; Church of God; Assemblies of God; Universal Church of the Kingdom of God; International Church of the Foursquare Gospel; Christ Pentecostal Church; Christian Congregation; Mennonite; Brethren; Christian Reformed Church; Charismatic non-Catholic; Light of World; Baptist; Nazarene; Salvation Army; Adventist; Seventh-Day Adventist; Sara Nossa Terra). (6) LDS (Mormon). (7) Traditional Religions or Native Religions (Candomblé, Voodoo, Rastafarian, Mayan Traditional Religion; Umbanda; Maria Lanza; Inti; Kardecista, Santo Daime, Esoterica). (10) Jewish (Orthodox; Conservative; Reform). (11) Agnostic, atheist (Does not believe in God). (12) Jehovah's Witness. (77) Other. Recoded as: (11) and (4) = 0 (no religious identity), else = 1 (has religious identity)
All variables were recoded so that higher value means more or, in the case of dummy variables, one means "yes" and zero means "no".	

Appendix C

Person-level control variables included in Tables 2–4.

Variable	Definition
Age	Age of respondent [recorded in years completed]
Age ²	Age squared (age ²)
Female	1 (female); 0 (otherwise)
Education	Highest year of education: 0 (low) to 18 (high)
White	Do you consider yourself white, mestizo, indigenous, black, mulatto, or of another race? 1 (white); 0 (otherwise)
Marital status	1 (married, living together or civil union); 0 (otherwise)
Wealth	Wealth Index in Quintiles: using PCA first component (created using Household Asset Indicators: TV, fridge, telephone, cellphone, car, washer, microwave, motorcycle, indoor plumbing, indoor bath, and computer)
Catholic	1 (catholic); 0 (otherwise)
Conservative	Thinking about the political left and political right, where do you place yourself in this scale 1 (left) to 10 (right). recode (6, 7, 8, 9, 10 = 1; else = 0)
Urban	1 (urban); 0 (rural)
Employed	Are you currently: working? Not working, but have a job? (yes = 1; else = 0)
All variables were recoded so that higher value means more or, in the case of dummy variables, one means "yes" and zero means "no".	

Appendix D

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Happy	136,720	3.237142	0.8078754	1	4
Attend	103,393	3.017816	1.408502	1	5
Rel Important	136,797	3.429754	0.8646705	1	4
Rel Identity	135,092	0.9007787	0.29896	0	1
Age	137,971	39.77499	16.01323	16	99
Age ²	137,971	1838.471	1459.229	256	9801
Female	138,408	0.5089229	0.4999222	0	1
Education	137,063	9.510276	4.339511	0	19
White	138,410	0.237808	0.4257425	0	1
Married	138,410	0.560198	0.4963648	0	1
Wealth	137,324	1.44×10^{-10}	0.8749607	−5.987335	5.50567
Conservative	113,974	0.4316072	0.4953025	0	1
Urban	138,410	0.6779857	0.4672501	0	1
Employed	137,790	0.5303215	0.4990816	0	1
Catholic	135,092	0.5927072	0.491332	0	1

Notes

- Although happiness and life satisfaction tap into different dimensions of subjective well-being, we use the terms interchangeably. Most studies use the term “happiness” interchangeably with the terms “subjective well-being,” and “life satisfaction.” For a detailed review of these definitions, see [Easterlin \(2003\)](#).
- It is important to underscore that the religious landscape of the continent is undergoing very rapid transformation ([Pew Research Center 2014](#); [Lesage et al. 2026](#)). For example, a 2026 Pew Research Center study reports that Catholics remain the largest religious group in many Latin American countries, but the last several decades have witnessed a significant decline in the proportion of Catholics in Argentina by 13%, Brazil by 15%, Chile by 18%, and Colombia by 19%, to name a few. At the same time, the share of the religiously unaffiliated has nearly doubled in those same countries ([Lesage et al. 2026](#)). Also, as one anonymous reviewer observed, the dynamics of religious adherence are quite different among these groups; in Brazil, while non-practicing “evangélicos” exist, they are a tiny minority; in the Catholic fold, only about half of those self-identifying as Catholics effectively attend church.
- The religious categories used in our research are drawn directly from the denomination categories set by LAPOP in their survey questionnaires. It is important to highlight that religious categories such as “mainline Protestant” make sense in the US and Europe, but not in Latin America. The categories Protestant and Evangelical, for example, are used inconsistently in Latin America—most Protestants are Evangelicals, and most Evangelicals are Pentecostal or Charismatic. The distinction between Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal, which makes sense in a US context, does not translate as easily to Latin America. We thank two anonymous reviewers for this point.
- We acknowledge that how respondents understand the question related to individual religiosity can be subjective. We view denominational affiliation as an individual form of religiosity that likely does not yield as much life satisfaction as actual participation in religious services.
- Age-squared (age²) is controlled for in happiness research to mathematically model and capture the U-shaped curve of well-being across the lifespan. Including both age and age² allows us to identify the “pure” effect of aging, which typically dips to a low-point in mid-life before rising again in older age.
- White refers to respondents who self-identified as being “White.” Most Latin Americans are “mestizo”—a mixture of Indigenous, Black, and White. Hence, those who self-identify as “White” are probably respondents who display Caucasian phenotypical characteristics (e.g., light skin color). For more information on this phenomenon, see [Smith and Valente \(2026\)](#).
- By default, OLS chooses the largest category as “reference” (Catholic), but it is important to underscore that the category “Catholic” in Latin America is a very broad, encompassing everything from non-practicing cultural Catholics to Charismatic Catholics, whose beliefs and worship patterns mirror those of Pentecostals. Thus, we are aware that comparing “Catholics” with other specific religious groups can be problematic.
- There might be, of course, other reasons why people are unhappy. For example, as one reviewer observed, Santo Daime has indigenous roots, although it is a syncretic religion in its own right. Hence, their lower life satisfaction might not have to do with their religious belonging or identity, but with the discrimination they suffer.
- Since “Catholic” is still the cultural default mode in most Latin American countries, people who identify as Catholic (individual religiosity), despite not practicing or attaching importance to religion, will fill the category that produces a negative association

between religious identity and well-being. People who have opted out of the cultural default mode religion, Catholicism—e.g., Evangelicals—will, on average, be much more likely to practice and attach more importance to religion. Thus, the difference in well-being could be between those who practice and attach importance to religion and those who do not, regardless of whether the latter are atheists/agnostics or cultural Catholics. This is relevant to Hypotheses 2c, 3a and 3b. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

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