

How religion can heighten or help with financial stress

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Churchgoers who are strapped for cash may experience a spike in anxiety when the donation plate is passed. However, knowing they have a church family to support them in times of need may help ease their money worries.

A new study by University of Arizona researcher Ashley LeBaron

illuminates the ways in which [religious involvement](#) can alleviate or exacerbate [financial stress](#).

The study, published in the journal *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, draws upon 134 interviews with religious leaders and parents in Ireland and the United Kingdom who consider themselves to be "highly involved" in their religion.

The results suggest that religion's effects on financial stress are not black and white, said LeBaron, a doctoral student who studies [family](#) finance in the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

"There's an effort to view research on religion and family with a more balanced perspective—to acknowledge that in some ways, in some circumstances, religion can harm families, and in some circumstances, it can help families," LeBaron said. "That was a natural perspective to take with this paper because the data clearly showed that when families were talking about religion and how it impacted their finances, sometimes they talked about how religion was really beneficial to their finances and their family, and sometimes it made their financial stress worse."

The data was originally gathered for a different research project, not involving LeBaron, on religion's impact on families. Study participants were not specifically asked about their finances in the interviews. However, financial themes frequently emerged in their responses, which led a colleague at Brigham Young University to share the data with LeBaron for further analysis.

LeBaron and her co-authors, who include that colleague from BYU and two others, identified five ways in which religious involvement may relieve financial stress and four ways in which it may make financial stress worse.

How it can help

—Some of the study participants interviewed said that because religion reduced materialism and de-emphasized the importance of material objects, it made them less likely to be pressured to spend money to accumulate more things or "keep up with the Joneses."

—Some said they felt religion brought monetary blessings. They felt they were directly financially blessed because they donated money to the church, and they felt like their [religious community](#) was a source they could turn to if they needed [financial support](#).

—More than half of those interviewed said religious giving brought them satisfaction and gave them a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, which helped alleviate financial stress.

—Some said religion improved their perspectives on work. Even at times in which they didn't particularly enjoy their jobs, they said they were able to see their job is their calling and something bigger than themselves. Some also expressed a belief that God would provide for them as long as they worked hard, and that idea helped reduce financial stress.

—Religion fostered a positive outlook on financial struggles for many participants. In short, their belief in a higher power gave them hope that any financial challenges would ultimately turn out OK.

How it can hurt

—Some people reported feeling their religious involvement came with increased financial obligations and, as a result, increased financial stress. Some talked about the strain of making faith-based charitable donations

or contributions to the church. Others talked about the financial cost associated with certain religion-driven lifestyle choices, such as not cohabitating before marriage, which means unmarried couples must pay for two residences instead of one. Some also talked about participating in financially demanding religious experiences, such as missions, pilgrimages or enrolling children in religious schools.

—Several interviewees talked about the fact that religion requires time sacrifice. They said commitments to church activities, such as volunteering or doing mission work, sometimes cut into their payable work hours.

—In about two-thirds of interviews, respondents said religious values clashed with their work. Some made career decisions based on their religious beliefs or family values. For example, one Catholic woman talked about giving up her job to stay home with her children, which was a significant financial sacrifice.

—Some talked about the fact that their religious values clashed with materialism and said the tension between the two could result in stress. An Amish Menonite woman, for instance, talked about the stress of feeling disconnected from other women because she doesn't dress like them or care about money and status in the same way.

A few participants talked about both positive and negative impacts of religion on their financial stress, LeBaron said. Differences were not observed between respondents' religious affiliations, which were: 34% from various Protestant denominations; 28% Catholic; 12% nondenominational Christian; 10% Islamic; 5% Hindu, Buddhist or Baha'i; 4% Jewish; 3% Mormon; and 3% other Christian denominations.

LeBaron said she hopes her findings will help provide a better understanding—for both religious and non-religious people—of how

religion can interact with family finance.

"The take-home message for people who are religious or people who work with religious people—like counselors, therapists or [religious leaders](#)—is to be open to the idea that religion can have benefits and also drawbacks," LeBaron said. "It's good to understand both because then you're in a better place to mitigate the drawbacks and optimize the positive aspects."

LeBaron said future studies should continue to explore the relationship between [religion](#) and financial [stress](#), and why that relationship might differ from person to person.

"Religion and finance are an interesting combination of things to look at because they are two things that are very salient to some families," she said. "Religion and money both impact their daily life, so hopefully more studies will take both into account in the future."

More information: Ashley B. LeBaron et al, Finances, religion, and the FAAR model: How religion exacerbates and alleviates financial stress., *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/rel0000294](#)

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