

Is it pretty outside? Then you're less likely to go to church

By Sara Weissman|Religion News Service

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Can a beautiful landscape compete with religious worship?

A Baylor University study, published in the journal *Sociology of Religion*, found that U.S. counties with nicer weather and prettier natural surroundings see lower rates of religious affiliation. The study authors suggest that, yes, people tend to use nature as a spiritual resource, making it a competitor with organized religious institutions.

Sociology doctoral candidate Todd Ferguson, who co-authored the study, noticed the correlation between natural scenery and lower religious adherence while looking at a map of regional variations in natural amenities. He saw that it was “almost a mirror image” of another map, one that showed varying levels of religiosity in the U.S.

“People continually bring up this idea of nature-based spiritual fulfillment — whether it’s people who are hiking, surfing, backpacking — in other people’s work,” said Ferguson. “We were trying to see, if this is happening at the individual level, maybe it’s actually affecting large regions like counties.”



Using a U.S. Department of Agriculture scale for natural amenities and data from the Religious Congregations and Membership Study and the U.S. Census Bureau, Ferguson and his colleague Jeffrey Tamburello ultimately confirmed their hypothesis, examining religious adherence rates across 3,107 counties using the county-level rates per 1,000 people. The study included members of religious institutions as well as an estimated number of participants who are not officially members.

Counties in regions such as the Pacific Northwest with more natural amenities — mountains, bodies of water, forests, warm weather — had lower percentages of people belonging to traditional religious institutions than counties in regions such as the Midwest with flatter landscapes and colder winters.

Is this adverse relationship between natural beauty and religious affiliation an American phenomenon? Ferguson and Tamburello aren't sure, but it's a question "we'd love to explore next," Ferguson said.

"The way America was settled, the last part to be settled was the West Coast and that has the highest level of natural amenities. A lot of times, frontiers or settlements have lower levels of religiosity,"

Ferguson said. “Our finding could be interpreted as an echo of the frontier West.” But Ferguson and Tamburello tested their hypothesis without the West Coast and the correlation remained the same, suggesting that their research can’t be boiled down to American settlement patterns.

Still, Ferguson said he wonders how the results might differ in another country, such as India, where religious practice may not be as centered on congregation membership.

Ultimately, the study is part of a larger trend in American sociology research interested in “the nones,” people who answer “none of the above” when asked their religious affiliation, Ferguson said.

“Scholars have been trying to figure out why there are variations in religiosity in America and this study is one step to helping us understand that. We offer one piece of this puzzle.”

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