Religions and Human Flourishing

Exploring the Relationship Between Faith, Well-Being, and Human Development

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Brigham Young University

The conference on **Religions and Human Flourishing** examined a growing body of evidence suggesting that religious belief and participation continue to play a significant role in individual and societal well-being. Scholars from multiple disciplines, including sociology, psychology, psychiatry, medicine, religious studies, and family science, explored how faith contributes to human flourishing through stronger families, greater resilience, improved mental and physical health, deeper social connections, and increased meaning and purpose in life.

Opening the conference, **Paul Lambert** observed that human beings are inherently spiritual and that flourishing is connected to understanding one's identity and purpose. He argued that religious faith helps individuals connect with their deepest values and often contributes to greater life satisfaction, purpose, and resilience. **Dean Laura Padilla-Walker** welcomed participants and highlighted the collaborative nature of the conference as an effort to better understand religion's impact on human flourishing.

Session 1: The State of Religion in the United States

Justin Dyer of the Wheatley Institution examined long-term trends in American religious life. While church membership was relatively low in the late eighteenth century due to limited religious infrastructure, religious freedom created an environment in which faith traditions could compete, grow, and innovate. He noted that the separation of church and state contributed to a vibrant religious marketplace rather than weakening faith.

Drawing on observations by **Alexis de Tocqueville** and examples from the religious revivalism of the nineteenth century, Dyer argued that religious liberty fostered dynamism and growth among American religious traditions. Church membership increased dramatically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, peaking in the early 2000s before entering a period of decline.

The conference examined what some scholars have called the "Great Dechurching," the decline in formal religious participation since 2005. Church attendance and religious affiliation have fallen significantly, while the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans has increased. At the same time, data presented showed troubling increases in social dysfunction, including rising rates of loneliness, depression, and suicide.

Dyer highlighted research suggesting a significant relationship between declining religious participation and growing social challenges. One finding indicated that a substantial portion of the increase in suicide rates may be associated with declining attendance at religious services.

However, presenters emphasized that religion remains a powerful force in American life. Research by **Stephen Cranney** found that many Americans report personal experiences with God, even if they are not active participants in organized religion. A significant percentage of religiously unaffiliated individuals

continue to pray regularly and report spiritual experiences. Community remains one of the strongest motivations for church participation, illustrating the enduring human need for belonging and connection.

Session 2: Religion and Human Flourishing

One of the conference's most influential presentations came from **Dr. Harold Koenig**, founder of Duke University's Center for Spirituality and Health and a pioneer in the scientific study of religion and health.

Reviewing decades of research, Koenig argued that the evidence overwhelmingly supports a positive relationship between religious involvement and human flourishing. Religious participation was consistently associated with:

- Greater marital stability
- Stronger family relationships
- Increased happiness and life satisfaction
- Higher levels of meaning and purpose
- Greater hope and optimism
- Better coping during adversity
- Lower rates of suicide
- Improved mental and physical health

Koenig reported that most major studies examining religion and family life found significant positive effects on family stability and marital satisfaction. He also discussed research suggesting that spiritual striving has both environmental and genetic influences.

A central theme of his remarks was the importance of integrating faith into every aspect of life rather than separating religious convictions from professional, academic, or personal pursuits. Flourishing, he suggested, emerges naturally when individuals seek meaningful relationships with God and live according to religious principles.

Session 3: Religion and Health

The conference devoted significant attention to religion's relationship with both mental and physical health.

Mental Health

Shima Baughman of the Wheatley Institute presented findings from a major review of religion and mental health research. Across most measures, positive outcomes outnumbered negative outcomes by approximately ten to one.

Religious participation was associated with:

- Lower rates of depression
- Healthier coping mechanisms
- Reduced substance abuse
- Greater emotional resilience
- Strong social support networks
- Significantly lower suicide risk

One of the strongest findings involved suicide prevention. Regular religious attendance was associated with substantially lower rates of suicide and suicidal behavior.

Baughman highlighted the role of religion in personal transformation, noting how faith communities often help individuals overcome addiction, criminal behavior, and destructive lifestyles. She emphasized that faith provides meaning, belonging, forgiveness, and hope, all of which support long-term recovery and personal growth.

Physical Health

Jared Robbins of Duke University examined religion's influence on physical health. He explained that health outcomes are shaped by more than biology and medical care. Daily behaviors, social networks, meaning systems, and lifestyle decisions also influence long-term health.

Religious communities contribute positively by encouraging healthy behaviors, strengthening social connections, and providing emotional support. Research reviewed during the session linked religious participation to healthier lifestyles, lower rates of smoking and substance abuse, and reduced risks for a variety of health conditions.

The presenters emphasized that religion affects health through multiple pathways: behavioral, psychological, social, and spiritual.

Social Health

Loren Marks discussed religion's contribution to social well-being. Religious involvement was presented as one of the most consistently protective factors against crime and antisocial behavior.

Religious attenders were found to be significantly more likely to volunteer and contribute positively to their communities. The benefits of these contributions often extend beyond religious congregations to society as a whole through charitable work, social services, mentoring, and community engagement.

Session 4: Spirituality, Thriving, and Human Development

A major theme of the conference was the distinction between **flourishing** and **thriving**.

Mike Goodman explained that spirituality encompasses humanity's search for transcendence and connection, whether with God, other people, or nature. Religion provides the institutional framework through which many individuals pursue those connections.

Goodman argued that thriving should be understood as an ongoing developmental process rather than a static condition. People can continue to thrive even while facing challenges, grief, setbacks, or adversity. Thriving involves maintaining purpose, growth, hope, and joy despite life's difficulties.

Similarly, **Pam King** of Fuller Seminary described thriving as a forward-looking process focused on who a person is becoming. Flourishing may reflect a current state of well-being, while thriving reflects movement toward greater purpose, maturity, and meaning.

A recurring theme throughout the session was the central role of love, relationships, and purpose in human development.

Session 5: Family Flourishing and Religious Communities

The conference also explored religion's role in strengthening families across diverse cultural and religious contexts.

Antonious Skipper discussed the role of faith in sustaining Black families and marriages, emphasizing the importance of prayer, community, and shared religious commitment.

David Dollahite and **Loren Marks** presented findings from the American Families of Faith Project, which has documented hundreds of family narratives through interviews and video recordings. Their work highlights the importance of vision, faith, family relationships, and religious practices in strengthening marriages and intergenerational connections.

The presenters emphasized that strong families often serve as the primary setting where faith, moral values, resilience, and hope are transmitted across generations.

Session 6: Rumors of Religion's Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated

The conference concluded with a discussion of whether religion is truly disappearing from American life.

Psychiatrist **Sam Wilkinson** examined widespread narratives about declining religiosity and growing secularization. While acknowledging significant declines in institutional participation, he argued that a more complete picture reveals substantial ongoing religious vitality.

Participants discussed several reasons for public skepticism toward organized religion, including scandals, institutional failures, and cultural shifts. However, several presenters suggested that religion is undergoing reform and adaptation rather than extinction.

Speakers challenged assumptions popularized by the New Atheist movement, arguing that many predictions about religion's disappearance have not materialized. Religion remains deeply important to millions of people and continues to provide meaning, moral guidance, and community.

The conference also examined perceived biases against religion in higher education, journalism, and entertainment. Presenters argued that religion's positive contributions are often overlooked or underreported despite strong evidence of its social and personal benefits.

Several speakers contended that public trust in traditional institutions such as media and higher education has declined, while religion remains a significant source of stability and meaning for many Americans.

Key Conclusions

The conference concluded with two overarching messages.

1. The Academic Study of Religion and Flourishing Is Growing

Participants emphasized the need for continued interdisciplinary research examining how religion affects mental health, physical health, family life, social capital, resilience, and human flourishing. The field remains rich with opportunities for further investigation.

2. Faith Continues to Be a Powerful Force for Human Flourishing

Across disciplines and methodologies, the presenters pointed to substantial evidence that religious belief and participation are associated with stronger families, better mental and physical health, greater purpose and meaning, increased resilience, lower rates of addiction and suicide, greater volunteerism, and healthier communities.

The conference's central conclusion was not that religion is perfect or without challenges, but that faith remains one of the most powerful and enduring sources of human flourishing. As one presenter summarized, if a medication demonstrated the same breadth of benefits documented across decades of research on religion, nearly everyone would want to take it. Religion, the conference suggested, remains an important and often underappreciated resource for helping individuals, families, and societies flourish.