



BlackEconomics.org®

“Black American Religiosity: Statistics, Analysis, and Outcomes”

Justifiably or not, it is an “accepted fact” that Black Americans are the most “religious” racial/ethnic group in the US as defined by Pew Research Center statistics on self-identification of religious adherence, self-assessment of a personal religious attitude, and attendance at religious services.¹ The purpose of this investigative analytical essay is to explore this “accepted fact.”

Is it not appropriate to attempt to substantiate a “fact” with logic? That is, we first enquire: What are the expected benefits of religion? Religiosity is an investment effort requiring time, energy, effort, and potentially nonfinancial and financial resources. Economic theory posits that individuals only invest when the yield, return, or benefit is enticing. The answer to the foregoing question should establish the benefit(s) to be derived from, and motive for, being religious and for practicing religion (operating as an adherent).

Having established a motive, we ask: Is there evidence consistent with the motive? That is, is there statistical or other evidence that Black Americans’ religiosity produces the expected benefits?

If evidence exists, is prevalent, and is persistently observable, then our investigation can come to a halt. Maybe. Why maybe? Because in most, if not all, religious literature used by adherents in the US, there is a theme that non-adherents experience troublesome life outcomes due to their non-adherence. But non-adherents may experience favorable times, but they must pay recompense for the deeds performed by non-adherents. Further religious literature conveys that, while righteous religious adherents are generally expected to be protected from adverse life outcomes, even they are not fully inoculated against suffering from life difficulties. But is it not true that periods of favorable and unfavorable outcomes of random duration are consistent with life experiences for all? The just described four-quadrant outcome set certainly appears as an arrangement configured by a “confidence wo/man” to cover all the bases to assure marks that the religion s/he is selling accurately predicts what should be expected after becoming an adherent.

Thinking logically, it is only necessary to consider three bins when pairing expected benefits with religious adherents vs. non-adherents. First, a very appealing religion guarantees its adherents good times—all or most of the time. Second, an adherent should not preclude the possibility of idiosyncratic deviations from good times of random duration. Importantly, the religious motive must certainly guarantee that the good times enjoyed by adherents must exceed significantly deviations from good times. But the paired set (two bins) of outcomes for religious adherents must also exceed significantly the paired set of outcomes for religious non-adherents. Non-adherents

are expected to experience idiosyncratic deviations from bad times (i.e., good times), but these deviations and their durations must pale in comparison to the bad times experienced by non-adherents. To simplify and clarify, the three bins are: (1) Mainly good times for adherents; (2) some good and some bad times for certain adherents and non-adherents; and (3) Mainly bad times for non-adherents.

If we were to map this three-bin framework of expected outcomes for adherents and non-adherents onto the population of racial/ethnic groups or their ratios, it should be possible to determine whether the data on religiosity in the US comports with the logic of outcomes that religiosity is expected to produce.

Probably the most important clarification to consider is that good times are defined as: Enjoying the benefits of life available from high income and wealth on a physical (material consumption and sound health) and mental (high educational attainment, high intellectual performance, and low mental health problems) level. Spiritual benefits are not considered because they are embodied in the adherents or non-adherents. Similarly, bad times are defined as: Enduring suffering from the absence of the just described benefits of life due to low income and wealth on a physical and mental level.

However, the foregoing analytical mapping procedure makes it obvious that possibly the easiest method for identifying whether religiosity produces expected benefits (good times) and/or suffering (bad times) is to assemble religions in a hierarchy based on income and wealth. It is notable that income or wealth hierarchies mirror well socioeconomic racial/ethnic hierarchies.

As one of the nation's most prolific resources for research about religion, the Pew Research Center reports the following:

- About 44% of Jewish adherent households had total income exceeding \$100K in 2014. Among Hindu adherent households, 36% had incomes exceeding \$100K. The range of percentages of various White (including White Hispanics) Protestant Christian denominations and Catholics with household incomes exceeding \$100K was from 35% (Episcopalians) to 9% (American Baptist Convention USA). Results for the two largest Black Protestant denominations (the Church of God in Christ and the National Baptist Convention) showed that just 9% of households of these denominations had income exceeding \$100K.ⁱⁱ
- The Pew Center's 2023-24 Religion Landscape Study reports that Just 14% of households among historically Black Christian Protestant denominations had incomes exceeding \$100K; the lowest value for the four racial/ethnic groups surveyed.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is transparent and widely known that Black American households are at the bottom of the nation's income by race/ethnicity hierarchy. Also, voluminous research shows that low household income is positively correlated with outcomes that represent bad times: e.g., lower wealth; lower educational attainment, poorer health, higher unemployment, lower home ownership rates and valuations, poorer quality neighborhoods, higher crime rates, and higher incarcerations rates than households with higher incomes.

In our view, the following possibilities form as inferences from the foregoing results:

1. Black religiosity statistics are biased due to errors in survey research design.
2. Black Americans provide inaccurate responses during religiosity determination data collection efforts.
3. Black Americans' religiosity is consistent with existing statistics, but our life outcomes are inconsistent with expected outcomes discussed here because we have a much higher than expected proportion of religious adherents uncannily and mysteriously stuck in the "second" bin for time durations that are unexpectedly lengthy.

On the other hand, the disconnect between the expected benefits from high religiosity and life outcomes for Black Americans may be explained as follows:

1. Key social factors (racism and discrimination) intervene forcefully and consistently to prevent Black Americans from enjoying the expected benefits of their religiosity.
2. If item 1 is correct, then Black Americans are adherents to poor quality religions that do not provide tools required to render harmless the relevant social factors that are blocking the benefits of high religiosity.
3. The metric(s) used to measure religiosity is inadequate because it (they) fails to account for the intensity of adherents' religious practices; the assumption being that the intensity of adherence always and everywhere facilitates and ensures capture of expected benefits that accrue to religious adherent.
4. Other.

An appropriate takeaway from this investigative analytical essay is that there is a significant mismatch between widely held notions about Black Americans' religiosity, the statistics that support those notions, and the benefits that are expected to be derived from religiosity. This mismatch bears further and deeper analysis and rationalization—especially by Black Americans individually and collectively.

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ⁱ Pew Research Center (2025). "2023-24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study Interactive Database." Doi: 10.58094/3zs9-jc14. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/>) Ret. (030725). This source reports that Black Americans more than Whites, Hispanics, or Asians self-identify as being religious adherents (77%); Black Americans more than any of the other group report that they consider themselves to be very religious (29%); and Black American exceed all other groups in reporting weekly religious service attendance (29%).

ⁱⁱ David Masci (2016). "How Income Varies Among U.S. Religious Groups." Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/10/11/how-income-varies-among-u-s-religious-groups/> (Ret. 030725).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Op. cit.* (Pew Research Center (2025)).