

# Editorial: Religion, mental health & grace

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Researchers recently documented the connection between religious activity and mental health. But a throwaway line in [a report on that study](#) provides a key to interpreting what it all means.

“Religion better for mental health than sport, study finds,” the European version of *Newsweek* reported.



Editor Marv Knox To digest the issue, let's talk about:

- The research
- Theories about the findings
- The throwaway line
- A reinterpretation of the results

## **The research**

Participation in a church, synagogue or mosque leads to a decline in depression, according to researchers from the London School of Economics and the Erasmus University Medical Center in the Netherlands.

The study showed “a decline in depressive symptoms” among older

Europeans—the focus of the study—who participate in a religious congregation. Meanwhile, participation in a political party “had a detrimental effect on mental health.” And while participation in sports and social clubs resulted in short-term improvement, they did not result in long-term decline in depression.

“Religious activity, such as going to a church, mosque or synagogue regularly, was the only reliable predictor of sustained mental welfare among the factors studied,” *Newsweek* said, citing Mauricio Avendano, the study’s lead author. His report was published in the [\*American Journal of Epidemiology\*](#). “The church appears to play a very important social role in keeping depression at bay and also as a coping mechanism during periods of illness in later life,” Avendano said.

## **Theories**

The research doesn’t show how much of the anti-depressive benefit is due to “religious factors,” such as belief in God, and how much can be attributed to “the sense of belonging which comes with being part of a group.”

Avendano suggested medical professionals and psychologists should look at “the kind of cognitive therapy that you may get from having this (church) help to deal with moments of illness.”

The article cited a Harvard University study that showed meditation, linked with religious practice, particularly among Hindus and Buddhists, “alters the structure of the brain, resulting in improved memory and reduction of stress.”

Nick Spencer, a staff member with Theos, a religion think-tank in the United Kingdom, said the reason religious activity provides a greater benefit than participation in other groups is because “religious belief furnishes people with a sense of purpose, secure identity and security with

regards to your ultimate destiny.”

Taking a contrary position, Terry Sanderson, president of the U.K.’s National Secular Society, insisted “friendship and human interaction,” not religion, are factors in improving mental health.

### **That throwaway line**

Citing the lone religious exception to lower levels of depression and recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder, the article noted, “... children with a strict religious upbringing often expressed increased mental health problems.”

### **Reinterpreting the results**

Consider that finding for a moment: Children who grow up under strict religion suffer “increased mental health problems.” That fact provides a case where the exception proves the rule.

The one circumstance under which religious participation does not lead to improved mental health happens when children—who do not have the maturity and experience to evaluate external forces clearly—are exposed to toxic religion.

In other words, they don’t experience grace.

Of course, thinking pure and noble and uplifting thoughts—Avenando’s “cognitive therapy”—improves mental health. So does the Harvard study’s meditation, the distilled, focused contemplation of transcendence, which Christians and Jews call God. And, of course, Spencer is correct in asserting faith’s purpose, identity and ultimate security are vital.

### **The missing common denominator**

But the missing common denominator for people who don’t benefit from

faith practice—kids who grow up with rigid, law-full religion—is grace. Others receive it; they don't.

Grace is both external and internal. It's created by God the Father, mediated by Jesus and administered by the Holy Spirit. In the context of this study, grace is made manifest in community. We experience grace tangibly in the love, nurture, support and unity we feel among other believers. When we receive grace, we appropriate it internally by how we see God, the world, church and ourselves, as well as how we feel about our place among others in Christ.

We must be clear: Poor mental health, and in this context, depression, is not an absolute indicator of the absence of grace in a person's life. Some mental health issues, often including depression, are medical problems. Mental illness is a disease.

But grace can, and often does, help.

And grace is the reason church is better for you than sports clubs or civic organizations, and way better for you than political parties. Let's be honest; grace is the reason some churches are better for you than others. Grace abounds in some and is hard to find in others.

Thank God for grace.