

Religion Status, Trust, and Happiness: United States and Georgia

DINELLO NATALIA, PhD

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, D.C, USA

ORCID: [0000-0003-4436-4642](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4436-4642)

ABSTRACT

Based on public opinion surveys and using the “three B’s” – belief, belonging, and behavior – module for measuring religiosity, this paper reveals Georgians’ differences from Americans in their more profound and certain beliefs in God, greater importance of religion in their lives, and a sharper contrast between trust in religious institutions and distrust in political ones. It also highlights Georgians’ exceptionalism in their overwhelming identification with a single religious denomination, Orthodox Christianity; higher social conservatism; support for religion’s impact on politics; and similar or greater religiosity of younger people compared to older ones. Although causality between the variables cannot be proven, research suggests a correlation among religiosity, trust in religious institutions, and happiness and well-being, especially through the benefits of social relationships and community involvement. As Georgians’ exceptionalism is rooted in history and can improve the mood in society, navigating between traditionalism and modernism, conservative values and liberal ideas is likely to continue for some time, strengthening Georgia’s spiritual, cultural, and national identity.

Keywords: Georgia, religion, happiness, well-being, trust

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62343/cjss.2025.279>

Received: June 9, 2025; Received in revised form: July 29, 2025; Accepted: September 12, 2025

INTRODUCTION

The choice of the United States (U.S.) for an exploratory contrast to Georgia is driven by several factors. First, in its post-Soviet modernizing reforms, independent Georgia has actively sought to align with U.S. values and pursue closer ties, and the U.S. has offered support in promoting these values and establishing a partnership ([Integrated Country Strategy: Georgia, 2022](#)). Secondly, while the U.S. is a quintessentially modern society, it is widely considered more religious than other developed countries, particularly when compared to Western Europe. According to a leading scholar of religion, Peter Berger, a secular discourse resulting from modernity “can coexist with religious discourses that are not secular at all” ([Berger, 2012](#)). Although a direct comparison of such different countries as the U.S., characterized by religious pluralism, and Georgia, a majority Orthodox society, is tricky, their side-by-side investigation has value.

The founders of the U.S. favored a neutral posture toward religion to prevent infringement on religious freedom, and the country’s Constitution does not mention God. At the same time, nearly all constitutions of the States reference God or the divine. God also appears in the Declaration of Independence, the Pledge of Allegiance, and on U.S. currency ([Leppert and Fahmy, 2022](#)). A Bible is traditionally used during the presidential oath of office ([Andrew, 2021](#)), and “God Bless America” has become a standard phrase ending presidential speeches ([Vile, 2025](#)).

An association between God and country is even more pronounced in Georgia. One of the greatest Georgian writers and a leader of the national liberation movement, Ilia Chavchavadze (1837-1907), highlighted Christian faith – associated with national spirit – as a pillar of *Georgianness* ([Chkhartishvili, 2013, p. 198](#)). In 1987, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) canonized Chavchavadze, thus reinforcing the historical notion of an inherent link between an Orthodox belief and Georgian identity ([Sulkhanishvili, 2013](#); [Gegeshidze and Mirziashvili, 2021](#)). In the post-Soviet period, the GOC became very influential and helped promote a unique Georgian national identity ([Grdzeldze, 2012 and 2023](#)). The Constitution of Georgia is explicit about religion. Article 8 provides for freedom of belief and religion, recognizes the “outstanding role” of the GOC in the country’s history, and stipulates that the relationship between the GOC and the state shall be determined by a constitutional agreement ([Constitute Project, 2018](#); [2023 Report on International Religious Freedom, 2023](#)). During the run-up to the 2024 elections, the ruling Georgian Dream party proposed making Orthodox Christianity the state religion ([Georgia: Freedom in the World, 2025](#)).

OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

Overview

This paper aims to understand and contrast the status of religion in the U.S. and Georgia, including the expression of religiosity across several dimensions. To determine the role of religion in society and people’s lives, it delves into questions of trust in religious institutions and the effect of religion on happiness, well-being, and general satisfaction. It is the

historical record of religion as a means of social and emotional support and a source of life meaning that has suggested the choice of specific constructs for this study's exploration of their linkages to religion (Fagan, 1996).

The employed method is desk research of numerous public opinion surveys for the last two decades conducted by international and U.S. survey organizations, such as the Pew Research Center, Gallup, the World Values Survey Association, Ipsos, and PRRI. Research also uses surveys implemented by national or regional groups, including the American Bible Society and the Caucasus Research Centers. Purposive sampling has driven the selection of particular studies. Relevant to the research objective, specific criteria for choosing the surveys included balancing international, U.S., and Georgian studies; prioritizing those that facilitated coding religion status and the level of trust and happiness; and giving preference to the most recent surveys to capture present-day beliefs and sentiments.

Furthermore, the analysis in this paper builds on the U.S. and international studies that seek to identify a relationship between religiosity and other variables, with an emphasis on trust, happiness, and health. Among other research, it considers longitudinal studies implemented over the last century. Interpretation of secondary data has sought consistency between findings from examination of raw survey data and scholarly work on the respective subject matter. The claims of causality between the variables were avoided, while correlation was substantiated with evidence. Overall, this paper benefits from more than 70 sources ranging from scholarly articles and books to publications on public perceptions and assessments of the current state of religion and other institutions in the U.S., Georgia, and the world.

Definitions and Conceptualizations

As survey data form the basis of this paper, the analysis of findings considers the definitions of concepts by respective survey organizations. For example, the World Values Survey conceptualizes trust as a "fundamental element of social capital – essential for the cohesion of communities, vital for effective cooperation, and crucial for economic development" (Ortiz-Ospina et al. 2016). The Pew Research Center accounts for competence, benevolence, empathy, openness, integrity, and accountability in its definition of trust (Gecewicz and Rainie, 2019). Although these two definitions are not the same in their language, in essence, both of them suggest social cohesion based on integrity and reliability. They are also compatible with the conceptualization of trust by most, though not all, scholars as a relational construct and a social phenomenon that facilitates cooperation propped by shared norms (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000). A theological conceptualization of trust is rooted in faith and implies a firm belief in the integrity, veracity, and strength of God. As the latter conceptualization is based on scriptures, it is similar across various Christian traditions, although the interpretation of trust as action in accordance with God's will might be stronger in Protestantism than in Orthodoxy (Morgan, 2022; Niebuhr, 2021).

Similarly, there are commonalities and differences between various surveys, academic insights, and theological understandings in the conceptualization of happiness. The World Happiness Report defines happiness as subjective well-being, focusing on life evaluations

and emotional experiences ([World Happiness Report, 2025](#)). The Global Flourishing Study measures happiness and life satisfaction as part of a larger set of indicators, which include meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material security ([Brownstein, 2025](#)). Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle viewed happiness as a state of flourishing and living a well-lived life, linked to contemplation and the pursuit of virtue and wisdom ([Reece, 2023](#)). Contemporary philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists often use the term “happiness” interchangeably with subjective well-being, which encompasses life satisfaction, but they also account for healthy relationships, virtue, and life meaningfulness. In contrast to secular authors, theologians emphasize a connection to the divine as a source of true happiness ([Everhard, 2023](#); [Alcorn, 2015](#)), but there are recurring themes across secular and theological writings.

Variations in the definitions of key concepts discussed in this paper complicate the interpretation of survey findings and call for caution and care. But they do not prevent the feasibility of analysis. Even though different definitions may affect survey responses, they have enough in common to enable the identification of central viewpoints and patterns. A nuanced analysis is, however, imperative, and limitations of conclusions must be acknowledged.

“Three B’s” Module and Narrative Structure

The evaluation of public attitudes toward religion and religious practices uses a common module for measuring religiosity, which distinguishes the “three B’s”: belief, belonging, and behavior. Belief registers one’s relation to God and/or spiritual outlook on the world. Belonging suggests the entities (groups, communities, and nations) in which one has a place. Behavior refers to one’s actions and ways of conduct, including religious attendance and other religious practices ([Burge, 2024](#); [Jackson, 2025](#)).

Following the statement of research results, which highlights four sets of them, the discussion is organized into five sections. The first one examines the “three B’s” measurements of religiosity, based on public opinion surveys. The second section explores trust in religious institutions relative to trust in the military and distrust of political institutions. The third section employs studies and reports on happiness, satisfaction, and physical and mental health to inquire into the existence of linkages between religiosity and variables of well-being. Discussion concludes with an account of Georgians’ exceptionalism in their attitude to and practice of religion, as well as conservative views.

RESULTS

The analysis of global, U.S., and Georgian public opinion surveys and studies on the relationship among survey variables has generated four sets of results, which are presented here in a summary form. The following discussion section provides evidence and documents sources behind the noted findings.

First, under deep distrust of political institutions in the U.S. and Georgia and insecurity of polarized societies, religion offers a unique combination of beliefs, belonging, and behav-

iors that balance the mind, give meaning to life, and help overcome everyday challenges. Respondents in both countries acknowledge religion's role in strengthening morality and social bonds and in helping the poor and needy ([Pew Research Center, 2017](#)). Studies also reveal a correlation between religiosity, on the one hand, and happiness and well-being, on the other, through feelings of gratitude and spiritual peace, greater satisfaction with family and friends relationships, and community involvement ([Smith et al. 2025](#); [Brownstein, 2025](#); [Dunbar, 2021](#); [Harvard's 85-year study finds happiness, 2025](#)). Even more tangibly, there is a positive association between religiosity and physical and mental health, evidenced by fewer cases of depression, suicide, and disease among religious people ([Dominus, 2025](#); [Chen, 2020](#); [Jackson, 2025](#); [Zimmer, 2018](#)). The question of causation is a complicated one, but linkages between religiosity and a more favorable perception of and satisfaction with life are apparent.

Secondly, in both the U.S. and Georgia, the majorities say they believe in God ([Jackson, 2025](#); [Smith et al., 2025](#); [Gallup, 2023](#); [Global Religion, 2023](#); [Pew Research Center, 2018, 29 October](#); [Morrison, 2018](#); [World Values, 2014](#)), consider religion to be important in their lives ([Pew Research Center, 2024, March 29](#); [World Values, 2014](#); [Pew Research Center, 2018, 29 October](#); [Morrison, 2018](#)), and trust in religious institutions more than in political ones ([Saad, 2023](#); [Deane 2024](#); [Civil Georgia, 2024](#); [Khoshtaria, 2024](#)). Georgia has seen a revival of religious feeling and organized religion compared to the Soviet past ([Grdzelidze, 2012](#) and [2023](#)). The U.S. seems to be revisiting the role of religion after the decline in its importance earlier in the 21st century ([Jackson, 2025](#)).

Thirdly, despite some similarities with Americans, Georgians are different in many respects. They are relatively more religious in their belief in God and certainty about this belief ([Pew Research Center, 2018, 29 October](#); [Morrison, 2018](#)), the greater importance of religion in their lives ([World Values, 2014](#); [Pew Research Center, 2018, 29 October](#); [Morrison, 2018](#)), and a sharper contrast between their trust in religious institutions and distrust of political ones ([Civil Georgia, 2024](#); [Khoshtaria, 2024](#)).

Fourthly, Georgians are not merely different but exceptional, in contrast to Americans and Europeans, in their overwhelming identification with a single religious denomination, Orthodox Christianity ([2023 Report on International Religious Freedom, 2023](#)); higher social conservatism ([Pew Research Center, 2017](#); [Shevtsova, 2023](#)); support for religion's impact on politics ([Sulkhanishvili, 2013](#); [Pew Research Center, 2017](#)); and similar or greater religiosity of younger people compared to older ones ([Pew Research Center, 2018, July 13](#); [Pew Research Center, 2017](#)). This exceptionalism has roots in history: the GOC played a crucial role in the formation of Georgian statehood and the preservation of Georgian cultural and spiritual identity through long and difficult periods of foreign occupation or control. As a result, religious identity is tied to national identity. The lack of public confidence in politicians reinforces the GOC's authority in society and its effect on policies. While the Georgian population is overwhelmingly pro-European, the conservatism of the church, with its opposition to some Western values, influences both young and old and creates a paradoxical blend of traditionalism and modernism, conservative values and liberal ideas.

DISCUSSION

Conceptualization of Religiosity

Religiosity refers to the degree to which a person identifies with, adheres to, and practices a religion (Holdcroft, 2006). According to an influential conceptualization by Yoshio Fukuyama (1960), it can be broken down into four dimensions: cognitive (knowledge about religion), creedal (religious beliefs), devotional (religious feelings and experiences), and cultic (religious practices). This definition serves well the below discussion of survey findings as it covers all measurements within the “three B’s” module of religiosity.

Measurements of Religiosity

Belief

According to a Gallup survey, more than 80% of Americans say they “believe in God,” and one-half of believers state that “God hears [their] prayers/can intervene” (Gallup, 2023). “Believers in God” or “a higher power or spirit” were found by Ipsos to be more numerous in the U.S. than in other developed countries (Global Religion, 2023). Almost all Americans – 92% of adults – now hold some form of spiritual belief, in a god, human souls or spirits, an afterlife, or something “beyond the natural world”; and the share of Christian believers has recently stabilized (Jackson, 2025; Smith et al., 2025; Religion, 2023; Figures 1 and 2). Even though younger Americans remain far less religious than older adults, which suggests the possibility of an impending decline in the American religious landscape, on matters of spirituality, the age gaps are relatively moderate (Smith et al., 2025; Figures 3 and 4). In 2025, the American Bible Society registered the first increase since 2021 in “bible use and scripture engagement” among younger adults (American Bible Society, 2025).

Georgians stand out even among Eastern Europeans who are more religious than their Western counterparts: 99% of Georgians say that they “believe in God,” which is the highest indicator in Europe, and 73% state they are “absolutely certain about it” (Pew Research Center, 2018, 29 October; Morrison, 2018; Figure 5). In the latest World Values Survey that included Georgia, the same proportion, 99%, of Georgians said that they “believe in God,” and 97% identified themselves as “religious persons” (World Values, 2014).

Survey data thus highlights that both in the U.S. and Georgia, the majority believe in God. While Americans deviate from people in other developed countries in their relatively stronger belief in God and keeping this belief, Georgians distinguish themselves as more certain and dedicated believers compared to Western and Eastern Europeans, as well as Americans.

Belonging

The U.S. is positioned between a highly religious Global South and a mostly secular Global North, according to the 2023 Ipsos survey on religion. Americans are also in the middle among respondents from 26 countries in saying that “my religion defines me as a person.” Slightly above six in ten respondents in the Pew Research Center’s 2023-2024 Religious Landscape Study identify themselves as Christian, similar to the 2019-2020 data, and 7%

identify with other religions (Smith et al., 2025). It is important that Americans' affiliation with Christianity has plateaued, and the share of those who identify with a religion other than Christianity has been trending upward (Smith et al., 2025). Christians in the U.S. are no longer leaving their denominations, and other major religions are growing.

According to the 2014 Georgian census, GOC members constitute 83.4% of the population, followed by Muslims at 10.7% and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church at 2.9% (2023 Report on International Religious Freedom, 2023). The Pew's 2017 survey suggested that even a larger share, 89%, of Georgians are likely to identify themselves with a single religious denomination, Orthodox Christianity, and 99% of the Orthodox are proud of their religious identity. Only less than 1% of Georgians say they are atheists. More than one-half (57%) refer to "personal faith" as a reason for self-identification as Orthodox. The other 29% point to "national culture/family tradition" as a reason, whereas 13% consider both reasons relevant for their belonging to Orthodox Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2017, pp. 20, 58, 53, 56). While in the U.S., younger adults under age 40 are less likely (by 17%) to identify with any religion than older adults, no significant difference was found on this indicator in Georgia, as the majority of both younger and older Georgians show similar allegiance to Orthodox Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2018 July 13).

Those Georgians who say religion is "very/somewhat important in their lives" are more likely than others (by 22%) to voice strong pride in national citizenship (Pew Research Center, 2017, pp. 148-149). The link between religious and national identities – consistent with the traditional notion of Ilia Chavchavadze – is also confirmed by the preference of more than half of the Georgians interviewed in a 2013 study for an Orthodox Christian profile of politicians (Sulkhanishvili, 2013).

Despite the differences between religious pluralism in the U.S. and the domination of Orthodox Christianity in Georgia, the sense of belonging to a particular religion confirms and strengthens religious beliefs in both countries. Identification with religion is, however, more pronounced in Georgia. Open atheists are almost non-existent there, and belonging to Orthodoxy is substantiated by personal, cultural, traditional, and even political reasons, as national identity is tied to religious one. Even though disengagement from religion has lessened in the U.S., maintaining religiosity in the future is more likely in Georgia because younger Georgians express similar interest in religion as older Georgians.

Behavior

Secularization has been one of the greatest social transformations in the U.S. and other developed countries. The importance of religion in Americans' lives has been decreasing in the 21st century. Yet, in 2023, 71% of respondents in a Gallup survey considered religion to be either "very" or "fairly important" (Pew Research Center, 2024, March 29; Figure 6). Rather unexpectedly, the recent Pew Research Center's study suggested that secularization has been on pause in the U.S. in the last four or five years (Smith et al., 2025). While church attendance rates in the U.S. have been declining for decades, since the COVID pandemic, the number of people attending religious services – either in person or virtually – has remained consistent at about 40% (Jackson, 2025). According to Gallup, three in 10 Ameri-

cans say they attend religious services every week or almost every week, while 11% report attending about once a month (Jones, 2024).

Georgia is among the top countries in Europe in respondents' acknowledgment of religion's importance and in following religious practices. In the 2010-2014 World Values Survey, 97% of Georgian respondents considered "religion important," 44% acknowledged "attending religious services at least once a month apart from weddings and funerals," and 61% said that they were praying to God more than once per week, "apart from weddings and funerals" (World Values, 2014). The findings of the Pew's 2015-2017 survey were largely consistent with those of the World Values Survey. One half of the Georgian respondents claimed that religion is "very important in their lives," 39% stated they "attend the services at least once a month", and 38% said they "pray every single day" (Pew Research Center, 2018, 29 October; Morrison, 2018; Figure 7).

Lower religious observance among younger adults is common around the world, including in the U.S., where younger adults are less likely (by 17%) to consider religion "very important" than older adults. Georgia is an exception to this pattern. The Pew's research conducted in 106 countries in 2018 found that religion was more important (by 9%) to younger Georgians under age 40 than to older adults. In this respect, Georgia is set apart as the only country in Europe and one of the two countries, joined by Ghana, in the world. There is no statistically significant difference between younger and older Georgians in religious service attendance (Pew Research Center, 2018 July 13).

The greater religiosity of younger Georgians contradicts the overwhelmingly pro-European sentiment in society. A resounding 77% of Georgians said in a 2023 survey that they would vote to join the European Union if given the chance in a referendum (Europe Foundation & CRRC Georgia, 2023, 8). Younger Georgians' religiosity is consistent with the perception of religion's rise in importance in Georgia compared to the past. While 92% of respondents say religion is either very important or somewhat important in their lives now, a lesser proportion, 81%, point to its importance during their childhood (Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 64).

Georgians' behavior in terms of religious experiences and practices suggests solid materialization of their beliefs in God and belonging to the Orthodox Church. While a pause in the secularization tendency in the U.S. is met with surprise, the situation in Georgia is different. In the aftermath of anti-religion policies of the Soviet Georgia, religion is on the rise today and affects all population cohorts. The contrast in the two countries' trends has to do with the history of religion as well as the rebirth of national consciousness, revival of traditions, and cultural flourishing in Georgia.

Relative Trust in Religious Institutions

Americans' trust in the federal government has been low for decades, and public confidence in all U.S. institutions has seen significant declines. In a 2024 Pew survey, only 22% of U.S. adults said they trust the federal government to do the right thing just about always

or most of the time. The U.S. organized religion has not escaped the overall trend in declining trust. According to Gallup, in the past 20 years, the share of U.S. adults who express a “great deal/quite a lot” of confidence in the church or organized religion has fallen from 53% to 32% in 2023 (Deane, 2024). These 32% points were, however, higher compared to confidence in “the presidency” (26%) and Congress (8%), but about two times lower than confidence in “small business” (65%) and “the military” (60%) (Saad, 2023). Nonetheless, according to Pew, about 6 in 10 Americans say that churches and religious organizations have a positive impact on the country, thus revealing their better perception relative to the main political institutions (Deane, 2024).

Public attitudes to political institutions in Georgia are similar to those in the U.S. The government (the Prime Minister and the cabinet) is “fully” or “rather” trusted by 31% and “fully” or “rather” distrusted by 39%. The figures for the Parliament are 22% and 42%, respectively, suggesting an even greater distrust of the directly elected body. The level of trust in political parties is even lower (12%), with distrust expressed by almost one-half of respondents (Civil Georgia, 2024; Khoshtaria, 2024).

Signaling a divergence, trust in Georgian religious institutions is higher than in the U.S., and a contrast with predominant distrust of political institutions is sharper. Religious institutions are “fully” or “rather” trusted by a substantial majority of Georgians, 73%, and “fully” or “rather” distrusted by only 20%. For comparison, the respective numbers for the army are 76% and 7% (Khoshtaria, 2024). Therefore, while in both countries, the military is the most trusted institution, the gap in trust with the religious institutions is much larger in the U.S. than in Georgia. In Georgia, the church is trusted almost on par with the military.

Even more telling, surveys have repeatedly shown that the GOC’s leader, Patriarch Ilia II, is by far the most trusted public figure in the country: 89% of respondents in a 2021 survey had a favorable view of His Holiness, while only 4% had an unfavorable view (Orthodox Christianity, 2021). Although trust in a religious leader is not the same as trust in a religious institution, these two constructs are closely related. Integrity, knowledge, the sense of responsibility, and authenticity of religious figures in both declarations and actions have a profound effect on the attitude toward religion, while the clergy’s misconduct can erode faith (Durkin, 2025).

While a comparison of trust in clergy vis-à-vis politicians might be problematic because of different roles and historical and emotional associations around personalities, contrasting trust in various institutions is credible. A leading authority on institutions, Douglass North (1990 and 1991), viewed them as the “rules of the game,” which define the constraints that structure human interaction in political, economic, and social settings. Supported by either formal laws (as in governance) or informal social norms, traditions, and customs, institutions shape order in society (Fukuyama, 2011). A greater trust in religious institutions in Georgia – compared to that in the U.S. and in relation to political institutions – is consistent with Georgians’ greater religiosity in terms of belief, belonging, and behavior.

Happiness and Religion

The 2025 World Happiness Report, which registered self-evaluation of life and did not touch upon the theme of religion, identified Finland, closely trailed by three other Nordic countries, as the number one happiest country in the world ([World Happiness Report, 2025](#)). The U.S. was ranked 24th among 147 countries, and Georgia 91st ([Country Rankings, 2025](#)). These rankings reinforce a widespread view that wealth is a critical precondition for individual and societal thriving.

In contrast to the above-noted report, the Global Flourishing Study, which bases rankings on several metrics, found a stark divide between wealthier, principally Western, countries, which scored the highest for life evaluation and financial and material security, and less wealthy countries, which reported the highest scores for meaning, pro-social character traits, relationship satisfaction, and community involvement, especially involvement in religious communities ([Johnson et al., 2025](#)). Although Georgia was not among the 22 studied countries, the results of this research are instructive because of the link between flourishing and religion.

Indonesia, Mexico, and the Philippines – where religion continues to play an important role ([Rainsford, 2023](#); [Balita, 2023](#)) – received the highest scores on the composite flourishing index ([Tyler et al., 2025](#)). In Indonesia, which was ranked at the top, 75% of the survey participants – a much larger proportion than in either the U.S. or Georgia – reported attending religious services at least weekly. For comparison, in Japan, which received the lowest composite flourishing score as well as the lowest scores on a sense of life's meaning and social relationships, only 3% of the participants reported attending religious services at least weekly. The U.S.'s composite flourishing score, accounting for financial indicators, occupies the 12th place, which is considerably lower than that of Indonesia, despite a 17 times difference in per capita GDP between these countries ([Johnson et al., 2025](#); [World Population Review, 2025](#)). Confirming these findings, in the 2024 Ipsos survey on happiness, Indonesia and Mexico ranked among the highest on “happiness” and satisfaction with “religious faith or spiritual life” – in contrast to Japan, which scored among the lowest on these metrics ([Global Happiness, 2024](#)).

The Pew's study of Americans corroborates the link between religiosity and the sense of well-being. Religiously affiliated Americans are more likely to feel gratitude (by 23%), spiritual peace (by 27%), and “a deep sense of connection with humanity” (by 15%) than people without a religious affiliation ([Smith et al., 2025](#)). The 2022 Gallup data indicate that religious service attenders are more likely to say they are very satisfied with their personal lives than are those who make \$100,000 or more in annual household income. Close to seven out of ten (67%) among those who attend religious services weekly are “very satisfied,” compared with 48% of those who are infrequent attenders ([Newport, 2022](#)).

Eighty percent of Americans agree that churches and other religious organizations bring people together and strengthen community bonds ([Smith et al., 2025](#)). A 2019 study found that religiosity and attendance at religious services most strongly affect engagement with the local community and the number of friends someone has, as well as the level of trust in the local community and bondedness with friends and family ([Dunbar, 2021](#)). These

findings are especially revealing, as Harvard's 85-year study highlighted positive relationships – not achievement, nor fortune or fame – as the single most important predictor of well-being. Furthermore, actively religious people are significantly less prone to depression, suicide, or diseases, such as cancer, because of “higher levels of social support, better health behaviors, and greater optimism about the future” ([Harvard's 85-year study finds happiness, 2025](#); [Dominus, 2025](#); [Chen, 2020](#); [Jackson, 2025](#)).

Although research in the U.S. and internationally suggests a link between religion and people's happiness, there is relatively weak evidence of this relationship in Georgia. Regression analysis by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) conducted in 2020 found no statistically significant association between happiness and three variables – self-assessed religiosity, frequency of prayer, and frequency of engagement in religious activities aside from attending services. However, the fourth tested variable, self-described spirituality and belief in religion, was associated with people's happiness ([Lursmanashvili, 2021](#)). At the same time, a 2018 global comparative study based on data from World Values Surveys and self-assessment of health found that significant positive associations between religiosity measures and health exist in both Georgia and the U.S. ([Zimmer, 2018](#)).

In the 2024 Caucasus Barometer survey, 66% of Georgian respondents reported being “happy” and 10% “unhappy” ([Civil Georgia, 2024](#); [Khoshtaria, 2024](#)). In 2015-2016, 17% of Georgian respondents said they were “satisfied with the way things were going in their country,” and 78% were “dissatisfied” ([Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 167](#)). These figures are far from the Georgians' overwhelming (close to 100%) acknowledgment of the religion's importance in their lives.

Although more research is needed to understand whether Georgia deviates from the international pattern that relates happiness or life satisfaction to religiosity or is consistent with it, Georgians' positive outlook on religion and its impact on social relations and values is undeniable. Georgians are rated at the top of Central and Eastern Europeans in their broad view of religious institutions' roles in society – as the ones that “bring people together and strengthen social bonds” (viewed by 73% of respondents), “strengthen morality in society” (shared by 80%), and “play an important role in helping poor and needy” (expressed by 70%) ([Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 94](#)).

Georgians' Exceptionalism

Both the present-day U.S. and Georgia are characterized by deep political polarization in the struggle for power, public attitudes, and the media landscape ([United States: Freedom in the World, 2024](#); [Georgia: Freedom in the World, 2025](#)). As a culture war is fierce in the U.S., Georgia also experiences a clash between those who see themselves as defenders of traditional values and those who favor more liberal, Western-style ideals. There are, however, significant differences between the two countries regarding religion and social issues.

As Georgians overwhelmingly identify themselves as “believers in God” and “religious,” political opponents try to court voters by being both conservative and progressive, and

by speaking the language of both Georgian traditionalism and European integration (Gegeshidze & de Waal, 2021). This maneuvering is understandable given the state of public opinion. While being more religious, Georgians, including younger adults, are also socially conservative in their views on sexuality and gender. Homosexuality is seen as “morally wrong” by 90% of Georgians, and only 3% support same-sex marriage. There is only a 3% difference between younger and older Georgians who say that “homosexuality should not be accepted by society” – 91% and 94%, respectively. Among both younger and older adults, only 3% accept legal gay marriage (Pew Research Center, 2017, pp. 27-29, 106, 108). As demonstrated by sociological research, the GOC has played a major role in opposing LGBTQ+ rights and so-called “gender ideology” and has proven effective in preventing or slowing down the promotion of sexual and gender equality (Shevtsova, 2023).

Georgians also diverge from Americans on the issue of separation between religion and state. Less than one-half of Georgians (44%) say “religion should be kept separate from government policies,” and 52% state that “government should support religious values and beliefs” (Pew Research Center, 2018, 29 October; Morrison, 2018; Figure 8). In a 2013 study, the majority of the interviewees responded with a “yes” to the question of whether they “think that a politician needs to be an Orthodox believer” (Sulchanishvili, 2013). A view that “religious leaders should have large/some influence in political matters” was shared by 46% of Georgian respondents in the 2015-2016 Pew survey (Pew Research Center, 2017, p.100). Consistent with these views, the GOC holds considerable influence in shaping public opinion and policy, particularly on matters like marriage and family values, and thus impacts the legislative process (Religion’s Role in Georgian Politics, 2025).

The majority of Georgians (82%) support the view that “the dominant church in the country should receive financial support from the government” (Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 101). Hence, no wonder that state funding of religion is ranked “high” in Georgia (The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2025); the GOC enjoys financial benefits, such as tax privileges, and owns churches and monasteries on Georgian territory (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021).

The survey results reinforce the general research finding that a combination of domestic and international circumstances explains the GOC’s high authority in today’s Georgian society. As a powerful symbol of the Georgian nation, vis-à-vis the relatively newly formed state, the Georgian Church enjoys a partnership with the state, although its impact on the democratization of society and the rights of marginalized groups raises criticism (Grdzidze, 2010). The exceptionalism of the GOC’s current status is backed by the Georgians’ exceptionalism in the recognition of religion as a trusted institution, internal religiosity in terms of belief in God and participation in religious practices, and conservatism in the rejection of values that contradict Christian teachings.

CONCLUSION

Recap of Findings

In a nutshell, the review of the global, U.S., and Georgian public opinion surveys for the last two decades and a comparison of their results with assessment reports and scholarly research findings have revealed considerable religiosity among Americans and Georgians. The analysis has suggested a correlation among religiosity, trust in religious institutions, and happiness or life satisfaction – as perceived across various dimensions of these social constructs – in the U.S. as well as Georgia.

However, the expression of religious feelings, trust in religion, and the value of religious activities as a source of joy, satisfaction, and health is substantially stronger in Georgia than in the U.S. The Georgians' exceptionalism, compared to the U.S. and Europe, in their overwhelming identification with a single religious denomination, higher social conservatism, and support for religion's impact on politics, is compellingly underscored by the extraordinary importance of religion to younger Georgians.

The surveys and the previous academic studies explain this phenomenon by a contrast between the repression of religion in the lives of youths' parents in the Soviet past and the resurgence of religious and national identities in independent Georgia. The challenges of today's world can also prompt a search for refuge in faith in God and the comfort of a close-knit religious community. Religion flourishes in times of "existential insecurity" (Norris, 2015). Secessionist wars of the past decades, increasing insecurity in Europe and the world, and conflicts within Georgia could have pushed people to seek internal spiritual peace amidst external struggle and chaos.

This study has not distinguished between independent and dependent variables and has not sorted out the issue of causality, which remains a topic for future research. At the moment, the found association among the noted variables gives sufficient rationale for proposing a few recommendations to policymakers and civil society actors.

Recommendations

Given the positive implications of religiosity for the quality of life and the sense of happiness and well-being, one may wonder whether it is possible or advisable to push for the greater integration of spirituality into Americans' and Georgians' daily lives. In the U.S. case, this is neither feasible nor prudent because of the U.S. constitutional barrier between church and state and the church's entanglement in controversial policy issues, especially related to sexuality and gender (Newport, 2022). This would also be unwise in Georgia because such a policy could exacerbate divisions in society and toughen the battle between conservative and liberal tendencies.

Respect for the "freedom of belief, religion, and conscience," a tenet that is included in the Constitution of Georgia, rejection of any forms of religious persecution or discrimination, and creating opportunities for practicing religion to those who choose to practice and for the

flourishing of religious communities should be the best ways to ensure a positive influence of religion in society. It is indicative that Patriarch Ilia II rejected the Georgian Dream party's proposal to make Orthodoxy the state religion. In any case, the ruling party in Georgia does not now have a 75% parliamentary majority to approve a respective constitutional amendment (Guichard, 2024).

The current internal and external circumstances of present-day Georgia, amplified by the Georgians' religiosity, call for maintaining a partnership between the GOC, the state, and civil society. As acknowledged by respondents in the surveys, religion plays an important role in strengthening morality and social bonds, improving family and friends relationships, bolstering community involvement, and helping the poor and needy. The work in these directions should continue and even be extended, but civil society actors should not be complacent about the GOC's unique privileges and rights not given to other religious groups (2023 Report on International Religious Freedom, 2023).

In the spirit of non-discrimination and equality, a consultative role in government, especially in state education policies, should be given to all religious denominations. Also, concerted efforts should continue in the critique of harmful ideologies and the protection of the rights of women, LGBTQ+ groups, and minorities. Regardless of religious beliefs, this protection is guided by the human rights perspective and the country's interest in democracy and freedom.

Potentially, improvement in the political situation and faster economic development in Georgia can accelerate secularization and weaken conservative views, as this happened in developed countries. But lessons of the authoritarian past should deter any attempts to forcibly erase Georgians' exceptionalism: the latter is understandable, justifiable, and can be beneficial for social cohesion and spiritual peace. If Georgia moves closer in values and religiosity to the rest of Europe, the modernization process will occur naturally.

Ethics Approval and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or publication of this work.

Financing

The research was carried out without financial aid.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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After years of decline, the Christian share of the U.S. population stabilizes % of U.S. adults who identify as Christian

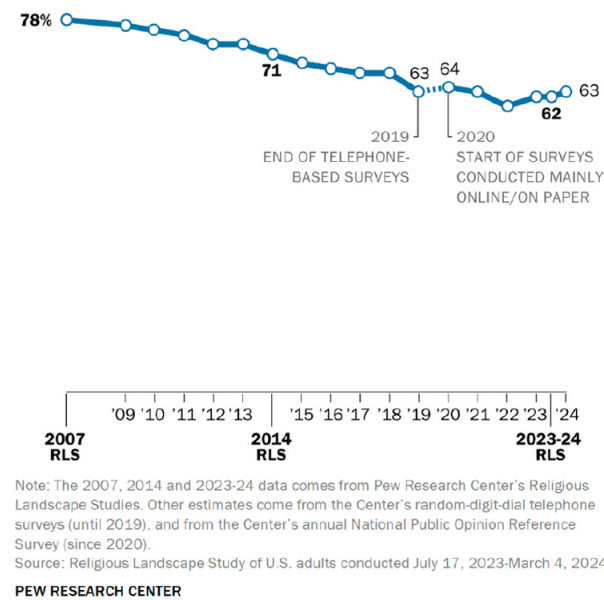


Figure 1. Results of the Religious Landscape Study of U.S. Adults, 2023-2024
Source: Smith et al., 2025

Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your beliefs -- you are religious, you are spiritual but not religious, or you are neither?

	Religious	Spiritual but not religious	Neither	Both (vol.)	No opinion
	%	%	%	%	%
2023 Jul 3-27	47	33	18	2	1
2002 Jan 11-14	50	33	11	4	2
1999 Dec 9-12	54	30	9	6	1

(vol.) = volunteered response

GALLUP

Figure 2. Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of Americans
Source: Religion, 2023

Big age gaps in shares of Americans who identify as Christian, pray regularly % of U.S. adults who say they do the following, by birth cohort

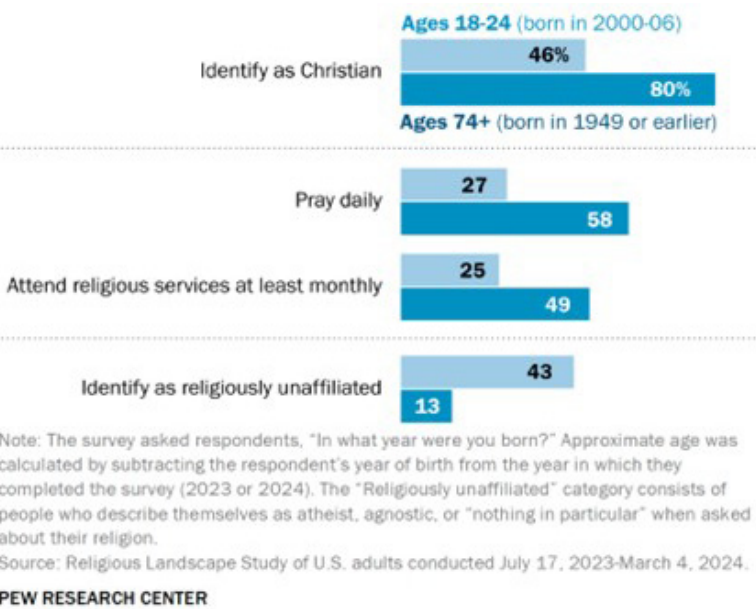


Figure 3. Age-Related Differences in Religiosity of U.S. Adults, 2023-202

Source: Smith et al., 2025

On measures of spirituality, gaps between younger and older Americans are relatively modest
% of U.S. adults who say they believe the following, by birth cohort

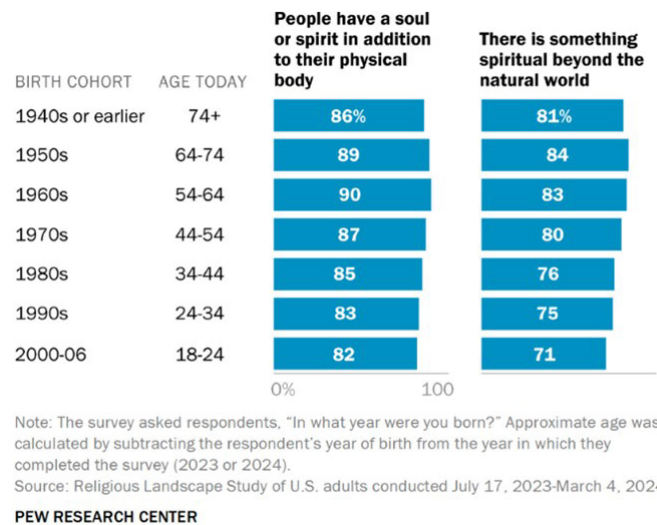


Figure 4. Age Gaps on Measures of Spirituality

Source: Smith et al., 2025

Belief in God more widespread in Central and Eastern Europe % who say they...

Country	Believe in God	Believe in God, absolutely certain	Believe in God, less certain	Do not believe in God
Georgia	99%	73%	24%	1%
Armenia	95	79	16	4
Moldova	95	55	40	3
Romania	95	64	30	4
Bosnia	94	66	28	4
Greece	92	69	33	6
Serbia	87	58	29	10
Croatia	86	57	29	10
Poland	86	45	38	8
Ukraine	86	32	51	9
Belarus	84	26	58	9
Portugal	83	44	38	13
Bulgaria	77	30	47	17
Lithuania	76	34	41	11
Russia	75	25	48	15
Italy	73	26	46	21
Latvia	71	28	41	15
Ireland	69	24	44	26
Slovakia	69	37	31	27
Australia	67	13	53	29
Spain	64	25	38	31
Switzerland	62	11	51	33
Germany	60	10	50	36
Hungary	59	26	33	30
Finland	58	23	34	37
UK	58	12	45	36
France	56	11	45	37
Denmark	51	15	36	46
Norway	49	19	30	47
Estonia	44	13	31	45
Netherlands	44	15	28	53
Belgium	42	13	29	54
Sweden	36	14	22	60
Czech Republic	29	13	16	66

Figure 5. *Belief in God in Georgia and Other European Countries*

Notes: Orange labels: Central and Eastern European countries

Blue labels: Western European countries

“Don’t know/refused” responses are included in “do not believe in God” or certainty of belief not shown.

Muslims respondents in Western European countries were not asked this question.

Source: Surveys conducted 2015–2017 in 34 countries. See Methodology for details

“Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues”

Methodology: Pew Research Center

Source: Eastern and Western Europeans Differ, 2018

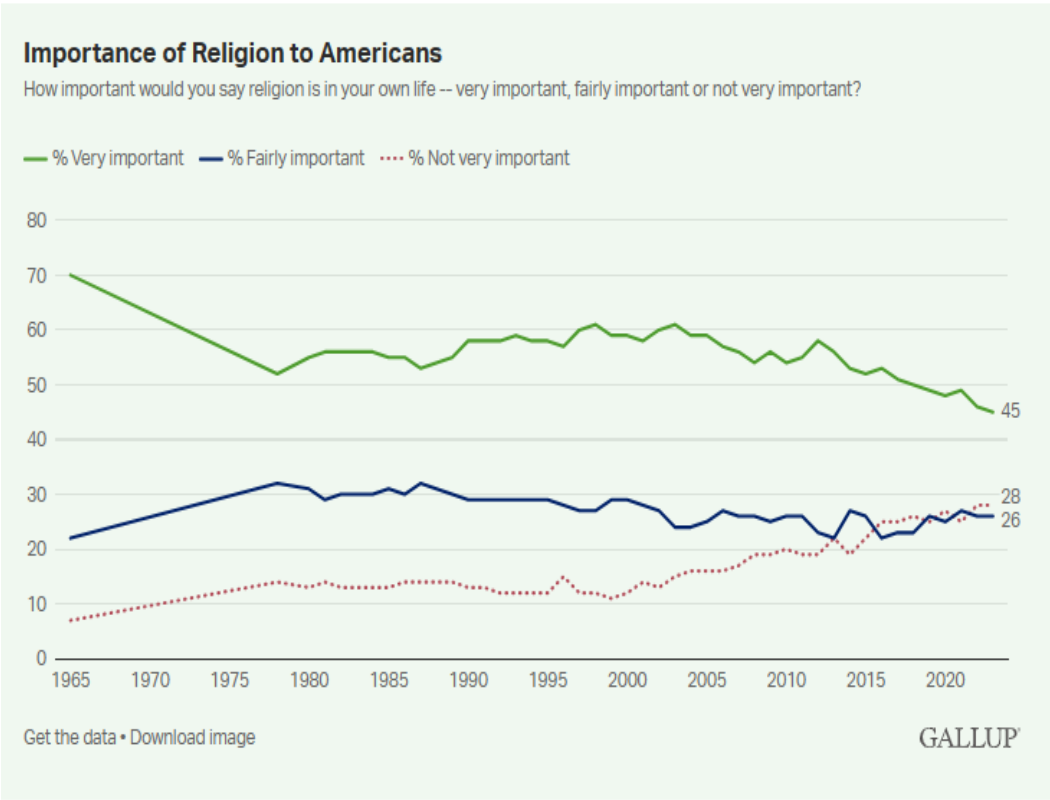


Figure 6. *Importance of Religion in Americans’ Lives*

Source: How Religious Are Americans, 2024

Overall, Central and Eastern Europeans are more religious than Western Europeans % who say ...

Country	Religion is very important in their lives	They attend religious services at least monthly	They pray daily
Greece	55%	38%	29%
Bosnia	54	35	32
Armenia	53	34	45
Georgia	50	39	38
Romania	50	50	44
Croatia	42	40	40
Moldova	42	35	48
Portugal	36	36	37
Serbia	34	19	27
Poland	29	61	27
Ireland	23	37	19
Slovakia	23	31	31
Spain	22	23	23
Ukraine	22	35	29
Italy	21	43	21
Belarus	20	30	25
Netherlands	20	18	20
Bulgaria	19	19	15
Norway	19	16	18
Lithuania	16	27	15
Russia	15	17	17
Hungary	14	17	16
Austria	12	30	8
Belgium	11	11	11
France	11	22	11
Germany	11	24	9
Finland	10	10	18
Latvia	10	16	17
Sweden	10	11	11
UK	10	20	6
Switzerland	9	29	8
Denmark	8	12	10
Czech Rep.	7	11	9
Estonia	6	10	9

Figure 7. Religiosity in Georgia and Other Countries

Notes: Orange labels = Central and Eastern European countries

Blue labels = Western European countries

Source: Surveys conducted 2015–2017 in 34 countries. See Methodology for details.

Source title: Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues

Pew Research Center

Source: Eastern and Western Europeans Differ, 2018

Western Europe more united in support of church–state separation % who say ...

Country	Religion should be kept separate from government	Government should support religious leaders and beliefs
Sweden	80%	15%
Finland	77	20
Bosnia	76	22
Denmark	76	20
Czech Republic	75	21
Spain	75	17
Belgium	72	23
Slovakia	72	24
Poland	70	25
Croatia	69	27
Estonia	68	26
France	68	29
Netherlands	68	29
Hungary	67	28
Greece	62	34
Latvia	61	29
United Kingdom	60	38
Germany	59	40
Moldova	59	36
Norway	59	36
Serbia	59	36
Ukraine	57	36
Austria	56	43
Ireland	56	41
Portugal	56	40
Italy	55	43
Switzerland	54	45
Romania	51	46
Belarus	50	42
Bulgaria	50	42
Russia	50	42
Lithuania	47	43
Georgia	44	52
Armenia	36	59

Figure 8. *Support of Church-State Separation in Europe, Including Georgia***Notes:** Orange labels indicate Central and Eastern European countries

Blue labels indicate Western European countries

“Don’t know/refused” responses are **not shown**

Source: Surveys conducted 2015–2017 in 34 countries. See Methodology for details.

Source title: *Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues*

Publisher: Pew Research Center

Source: Eastern and Western Europeans Differ, 2018