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# **God in the Workplace: Religiosity and Job Satisfaction Among US Public Servants**

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Given the myriad positive effects of job satisfaction, analyzing its determinants continues to be a much-examined topic in public administration. Research on religiosity in the public sector suggests that faith is uniquely important among bureaucrats. However, the direct effect of religiosity on public employee job outcomes remains unexamined. This study brings together these fields to examine the role that religiosity plays in job satisfaction among public servants. Using a framework that integrates religion into the public sector workplace, I hypothesize that religiosity will have a positive effect on job satisfaction. Drawing on data from the General Social Survey from 2000 to 2016 and through the estimation of an ordered logit model, the findings from this study support this hypothesis. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that religiosity has a direct impact in the public sector workplace. This finding has numerous implications for public managers—ranging from management practice to service delivery.

**Keywords:** Job Satisfaction, Public Servants, Religiosity

Religion can cause tension in the workplace, especially in the public sector. Public managers often have to negotiate requests from employees concerning the exercise of their faith on the job, such as if and where public prayer is allowed or how to accommodate religious dress. These types of religious considerations can have an impact on the implementation of policy. For example, a county clerk in Kentucky cited her religious beliefs when she ordered her office to no longer issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

While the interplay of religion and the public sector is a regular occurrence, many unanswered questions remain about religiosity among public sector workers. For example, although faith plays a heightened role among government workers, its direct effect on their jobs has not been examined. Indeed, scholars have found that faith is not only more prevalent among those in the public sector, but public sector workers are more likely than their private sector counterparts to want to incorporate their faith into their jobs (Freeman & Houston, 2010; Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Houston, Freeman, & Feldman, 2008). What scholars have yet to analyze, though, is the impact of this faith in the work that public servants undertake.

As a first step in addressing this issue, in this article I examine the role of religiosity on job satisfaction among bureaucrats. Given the positive workplace behaviors associated with job

satisfaction (e.g., increased job performance and decreased turnover intention; see Borgogni, Russo, Petitta, & Vecchione, 2010; Tschopp, Grote, & Gerber, 2014), any of its potential determinants should merit detailed examination. Using a framework that focuses on the needs of self-identified religious public servants and the fulfillment of those needs, I hypothesize that job satisfaction will be higher among religious bureaucrats than nonreligious bureaucrats. To test this hypothesis, I rely on data from the General Social Survey (GSS) covering a 16-year period from 2000 to 2016.

To test this hypothesis, which I later find is supported, I estimate an ordered logit model. I find that religious bureaucrats are more likely to express satisfaction with their jobs than those who are not religious. These results could suggest that religiosity has an impact on how bureaucrats view their work. Scholars, therefore, should begin exploring whether work performance among bureaucrats is shaped by their faith. These findings could have important consequences for public sector managers—especially as they learn how best to lead their workers. It will also be important for scholars to begin exploring which *types* of bureaucrats are more likely to be religious and what the behavioral implications of religion in the public sector workplace might be.

The article proceeds as follows. The literature is reviewed, followed by a presentation of the hypothesis. The data are then described. The results are examined, followed by a discussion of their implications and a brief conclusion.

## **Literature Review and Hypothesis**

Though defined in different ways, at its most basic level job satisfaction focuses on the joy derived from one's labor. Indeed, Spector (1997) defined job satisfaction as "the degree to which people like their jobs" (p. vii); further, in the realm of public administration, Jilke (2016) defined job satisfaction as "...the outcome of employees' individual expectations from their jobs and what they perceive they get" (p. 374). Simply put, job satisfaction focuses on how much people enjoy what they do for a living.

There have been numerous studies on job satisfaction within the private and public sectors. From 2000 to 2018, based on an Internet search of the term "job satisfaction" in peer-reviewed journal abstracts, there have been hundreds of articles published on the topic. In public management specifically, Jilke (2016) found that since 2000 there has been almost a score of articles on job satisfaction published annually.

Job satisfaction may be a popular research topic due to the number of positive outcomes associated with it. Perhaps most notably, research has shown an association between job satisfaction and job performance (Borgogni, Russo, Petitta, & Vecchione, 2010; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Job satisfaction is also associated with behaviors such as increased job commitment (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002) and decreased turnover intention (Tschopp, Grote, & Gerber, 2014).

Some correlates of job satisfaction are unique to the public sector. For example, satisfaction among public sector employees tends to be more strongly linked to affective and normative job commitment than it is among private sector employees (Markovits, Davis, Fay, & Dick, 2010). Additionally, public sector employees who are satisfied are less likely to express a desire to switch to the private sector (Kankaanranta et al., 2007).

Given these positive outcomes, it is perhaps unsurprising that numerous studies have explored the causes of job satisfaction. In the public sector, some scholars have examined individual level factors, such as demographic characteristics (Jung, Jae Moon, & Hahm, 2007) or personality traits (Cooper, Carpenter, Reiner, & McCord, 2014). Others have looked to more intermediate factors, such as organizational characteristics (Steijn, 2004). There has also been a focus on more macro factors, such as regime change (Jilke, 2016) or government budget cuts (Keifer, 2014). In one of the more comprehensive studies to date, Taylor and Westover (2011) found that public service motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics, and work relations all contributed to job satisfaction. Still, there remains a factor that has been largely neglected in this literature—that is religiosity.

There have been few studies explicitly concerning religion in the public sector. Over the past 20 years the number of articles concerning these two topics together is less than a dozen. This may be due to a level of discomfort that public administrators have regarding discussions about faith. For example, in a survey of American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) members, Bruce (2000) found that a majority believed it was inappropriate to discuss spirituality in the profession. Among those who were not personally spiritual, this number was close to 80%. As King (2007) wrote, “Once the idea of religion or spirituality is raised, public administration professionals—academic and practitioner alike—raise the red flag and wave it furiously...” (p. 110).

Articles in public administration that do discuss religiosity tend to cluster around similar themes. A few of the articles call on those in the public sector to use spiritual wisdom or the teachings of Jesus in their work (e.g., deHaven-Smith, 2003; Lynch & Lynch, 1999). Others have made preliminary observations on the role of spirituality among bureaucrats and have urged researchers to undertake more studies (e.g., Bruce, 2000; Lowery, 2005). In one of the broadest examinations into this issue, King (2007) introduced a model that reconciled religiosity and spirituality in the private sector and suggested ways that this reconciliation could be used in the public sector.

Some of the more quantitative studies in this area have provided evidence of descriptive and practical effects of religiosity among public servants. Studies, for example, have shown that bureaucrats are generally more spiritual and more committed to their faith than those in the private sector (Freeman & Houston, 2010; Houston & Cartwright, 2007). Beyond mere differences in faith commitment, bureaucrats are also more likely to report that they try to carry their religious beliefs into the workplace (Houston, Freeman, & Feldman, 2008). This is in line with Lowery (2005) who found in interviews with religious bureaucrats that they believe their faith informs the work they do. In other words, not only are bureaucrats more likely to be religious, they may also be more likely to make attempts to infuse their faith into their jobs.

While bureaucrats may want their work to be guided by their faith, studies have yet to show if they actually do. Thus, what remains unknown is whether faith has a direct impact on the work of those in the public sector.

### *Theory and Hypothesis*

What is the expected effect of religiosity on the job satisfaction of bureaucrats? To answer this question, previous research provides some clues.

Although King (2007) was among the early researchers to study religion and spirituality in the public sector workplace, it was Nash, McLennan, and Blanchard (2001) who developed the notion of “catalytic engagement” with regard to religion. Catalytic engagement defines religious practice

as learning about or feeling the presence of God or some equivalent and then becoming “personally enhanced” as a result (Nash, McLennan, & Blanchard, 2001, p. 230). This is religiosity as an inflection point leading to transformation.<sup>2</sup> It is not religiosity manifesting itself in the form of proselytization or only relying on religion in moments of ethical quandaries. Rather, it is religiosity that alters the needs and perceived fulfillment of those needs within people. Catalytic engagement with faith allows religious believers to incorporate their religiosity into the workplace as they focus on fulfilling specific needs brought on by their beliefs.

When considering the idea of catalytic engagement in the public sector, it is important to understand which workplace needs are altered by religiosity and also how those needs are fulfilled in public sector settings. Indeed, research has shown that having a religious or spiritual experience can have myriad attitudinal effects, such as an increased sense of “small self” or spiritual humility (Preston & Shin, 2017). These types of religious experiences can also have behavioral effects, such as getting people to think beyond themselves and more on serving other people (Fredrickson, 2002; Piedmont, 1999). Abundant evidence shows that those who are more religious are more likely to serve others, whether this means helping their neighbor or the homeless (Brooks, 2007; Putnam & Campbell, 2012), volunteering (Putnam & Campbell, 2012; Ruiter & De Graf, 2006; Uslander, 2002), or being more civically active (Smidt et al., 2008; Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2007). Collectively, these findings seem to suggest that religious individuals have a need to serve others; as a result, in their employment decisions they may seek ways to fulfill this need.

It is this need to serve that likely connects religiosity to job satisfaction in the public sector. Public sector employees serve others by the nature of their employment. Their jobs directly focus on their communities. Religious bureaucrats may, therefore, fulfill their need to serve by working in public service.

This need to serve others is likely to be stronger among religious bureaucrats; further, the work that these bureaucrats undertake in the public sector may allow them to meet this need. Thus, religious bureaucrats are likely to be more satisfied with their work than nonreligious bureaucrats. Religiosity, then, could have a positive effect on job satisfaction in the public sector and I propose the following hypothesis:<sup>3</sup>

*Hypothesis<sub>1</sub>: Job satisfaction will be higher among religious bureaucrats than nonreligious bureaucrats.*

## **Data and Methods**

The data for this study comes from the General Social Survey (GSS), a full probability survey that includes in-person interviews. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago has administered the GSS since 1972. Alongside standard demographic questions, the survey covers a number of national topics ranging from confidence in institutions to intergroup relations.

Based on the availability of questions, the data for this study comes from the surveys administered every other year from 2000 through 2016 for a total of nine different surveys. Given the nature of the research question motivating this study, the sample is limited to include only responses from bureaucrats. To determine if a respondent was a bureaucrat, I used the question, “Are you employed by the federal, state, or local government or by a private employer (including nonprofit organizations)?”

The dependent variable is a measure of job satisfaction. Specifically, on the GSS, respondents were asked, “On the whole, how satisfied are you with the work that you do? Would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little satisfied, or very dissatisfied?” Given the ordinal nature of the responses, I estimated an ordered logit model.

The key independent variable is a measure of religiosity. It has long been acknowledged that there are multiple dimensions to religiosity (Durkheim, 1912; Stark & Glock, 1968; Vaillancourt, 2008); therefore, in this analysis I used different measures of religiosity in an attempt to capture these dimensions. In particular, scholars have suggested that religiosity can be categorized as either public or private (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Paxton, Reith, & Glanville, 2014; Van Tienen, Scheepers, Reitsma, & Schilderman, 2011; Wuthnow, 1993). Public religiosity consists of actions that others can witness, while private religiosity is concerned with more personal displays of devotion. For the purposes of this study, I measured public religiosity as church attendance. I measured private religiosity as frequency of prayer.<sup>4</sup>

The GSS survey question that I used to measure public religiosity asked, “How often do you attend religious services?” Responses ranged from “Never” to “More than once a week.” This variable was, thus, coded as days per year and then log transformed to reduce skew.<sup>5</sup> Such a transformation is common in the literature (e.g., Lim & Putnam, 2010; Paxton et al., 2014). The GSS survey question that I used to measure private religiosity asked, “About how often do you pray?” The responses to this question ranged from “Never” to “Several times a day.” Given that these responses do not allow for differentiation based on frequency of prayer (e.g., differentiating between someone who prays twice a day and someone who prays five times a day), I dummy coded this variable—with those who pray at least once a day coded as 1 and all others as 0. This coding scheme is in line with prior research (Paxton et al., 2014).<sup>6</sup>

I included other independent variables as controls. Specifically, in keeping with recent work on job satisfaction in the public sector (Van Ryzin, 2014; Jilke, 2016), I included demographic variables such as age (measured continuously), education (dummy coded), race (dummy coded), and sex (dummy coded). I also included the number of hours worked, personal income, and family income. Each of these variables was measured continuously. Descriptive statistics for the variables are available in the Appendix.

## **Results**

As shown in Table 1, over 30% of bureaucrats in the survey indicated that they attend church, i.e., engaged in public religiosity, at least once a week.<sup>7</sup> This is more than five percentage points higher than the number of nonpublic sector employees who indicated that they attend church at least once a week. For the private measure of religiosity, almost 60% of bureaucrats reported praying at least once a day. This is approximately three percentage points higher than those in the nonpublic sector. These findings are similar to those from earlier studies showing that bureaucrats are more religious than nonbureaucrats (Houston et al., 2008).

Among all bureaucrats in the sample, about 55% identified as Protestant, 22% identified as Catholic, 2% identified as Jewish, and 15% identified as “none” meaning that they either did not identify with a specific faith, they were atheist, or they were agnostic. This distribution differs slightly from the rest of the country, but it is in line with previous studies of religion in the public sector. According to a Pew Forum survey conducted in 2014, about 70% of Americans identify as Christian, with about 45% identifying as Protestant and 20% identifying as Catholic (Pew Research Center, 2014). Around 6% of Americans identify with a non-Christian faith, with those

**Table 1.** Percentage of Public and Nonpublic Sector Workers by Religiosity ( $n=1,397$ )

	Religiosity	
	Public	Private
Public Sector	30.38	61.27
Nonpublic Sector	24.15	58.22

**Table 2.** Faiths of Religious Bureaucrats ( $n=1,187$ )

Religious Affiliation	Percentage
Protestant	60.84
Catholic	28.75
Christian	3.63
Jewish	2.19
Other	1.33
Buddhism	0.84
Islam	0.61
Inter-Denominational	0.58
Orthodox-Christian	0.51
Hinduism	0.42
Other Eastern	0.18
Native American	0.13

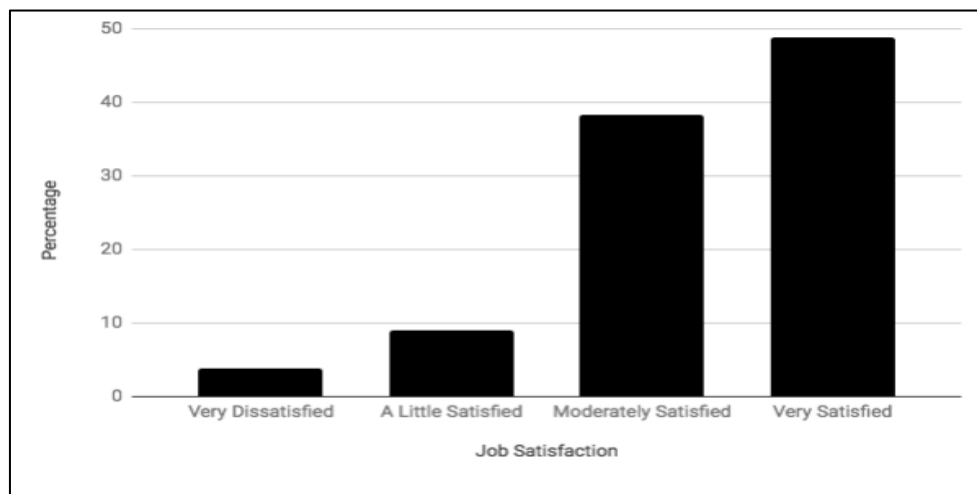
of Jewish faith occupying 2% of the total and the rest consisting of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and other faiths. Americans who identify as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” total over one-fifth of the sample, with those in the latter category making up over 15% of this total. In summary, Christians (specifically Protestants) are overrepresented in the public sector, while those identifying as have “none” in terms of religion are underrepresented.

The results in Table 2 display the distribution of religious membership among bureaucrats who identified with a religion. The table shows that the sample is overwhelmingly Christian, with almost 95% identifying as such. More than 60% of the total sample identified as Protestant and another almost 30% identified as Catholic. Approximately 4% identified as either Orthodox-Christian, interdenominational, or simply “Christian.” With the exception of Judaism, no other faith totals more than one percentage point.

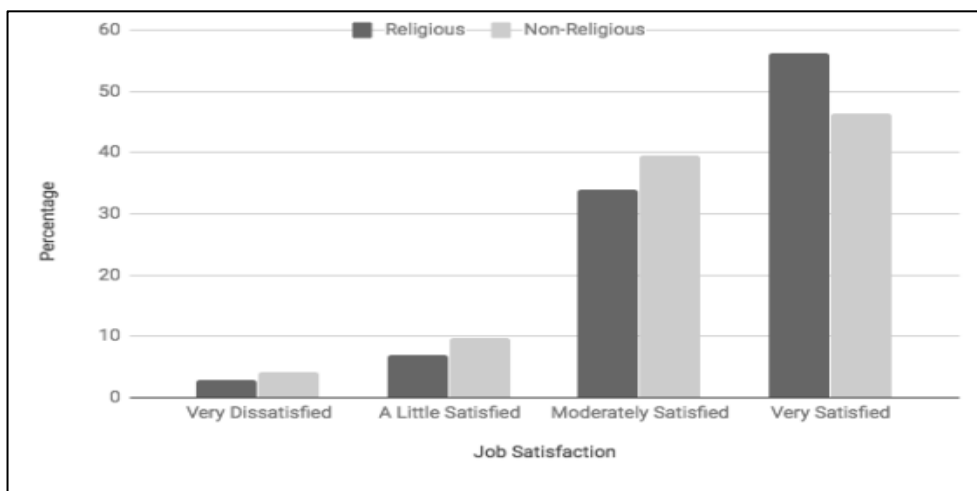
Regarding the distribution of job satisfaction among all bureaucrats, as shown in Figure 1, most bureaucrats indicated that they are satisfied with their jobs. Almost half said that they are fully satisfied with their jobs. Less than 13% said that they are either a little satisfied or very dissatisfied with their work.

Does this distribution change when the satisfaction of religious bureaucrats is analyzed separately? Figures 1 through 3 show the difference in job satisfaction between religious and nonreligious bureaucrats using each measure of religiosity. Those who indicated that they attend church at least once a week appear to be less likely to say they are very dissatisfied, a little satisfied, or moderately satisfied with their jobs than those who are not religious. However, these individuals appear to be almost 10 percentage points more likely to say that they are very satisfied with their jobs.

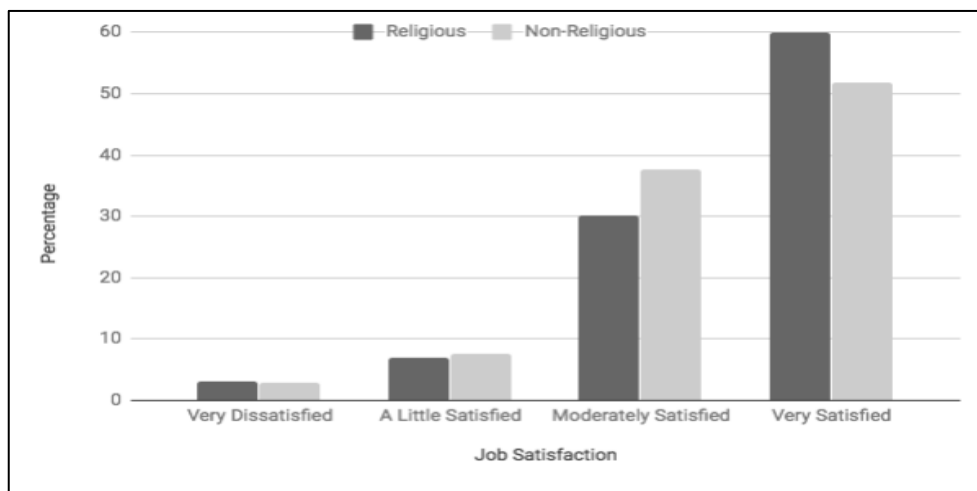
**Figure 1.** Government Employees' Job Satisfaction



**Figure 2.** Government Employees' Job Satisfaction by Public Religiosity



**Figure 3.** Government Employees' Job Satisfaction by Private Religiosity

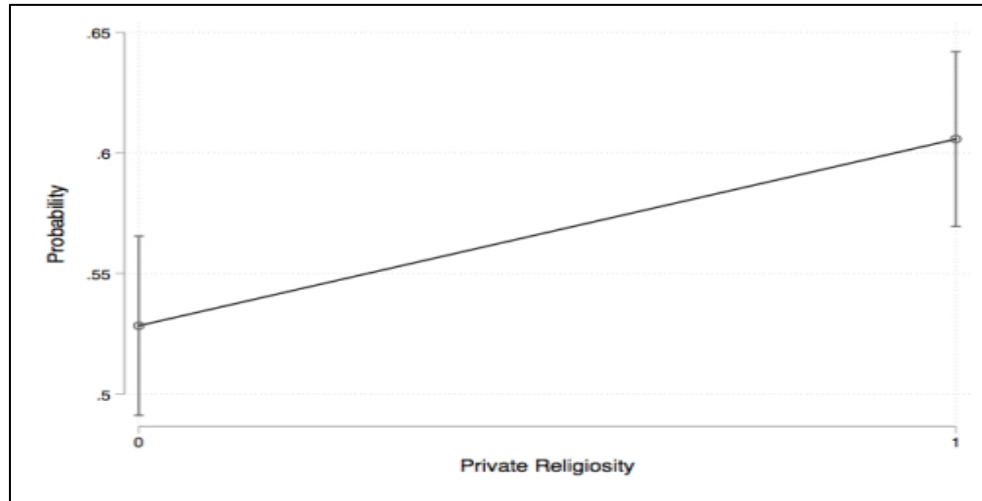


**Table 3.** Ordered Logit Model of Job Satisfaction, 2000–2016

Variable	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.
Public Religiosity	<b>1.02</b>	<b>0.04</b>
Private Religiosity	<b>1.40</b>	<b>0.15</b>
White	<b>1.84</b>	<b>0.25</b>
Age	1.01	0.01
Male	0.97	0.08
College	0.82	0.09
Personal Income	1.01	0.03
Family Income	0.98	0.07
Work Hours	<b>1.23</b>	<b>0.10</b>
Cut One	-2.63	1.04
Cut Two	-1.20	1.12
Cut Three	0.88	1.16
N	1397	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	
AIC	2616.82	
BIC	2658.76	

Note: Variables significant at 0.05 level in bold.

**Figure 4.** Predicted Probability of Being “Very Satisfied” by Private Religiosity, with 95% Confidence Intervals



This same pattern holds when considering the private measure of religiosity. While those who indicated that they pray at least once a day are almost seven percentage points less likely to say that they are moderately satisfied with their jobs, they are about 10 percentage points more likely to say that they are very satisfied. Although these figures provide *prima facie* support for the proposed hypothesis, additional analysis is still required.

The effect of religiosity on job satisfaction is estimated in Table 3 and displayed graphically in Figure 4. Those indicating they do not pray at least once a day have a predicted probability of



\$")' 'cZVY]b[ very satisfied, all else constant. For those who indicate that they pray at least once a day, the predicted probability increases to 0.61, all else constant. These findings demonstrate that the effect of religiosity on job satisfaction is both statistically and substantively significant.<sup>8,9</sup>

## **Discussion**

The results of this study suggest that religious bureaucrats are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs than nonreligious bureaucrats. Given the unique roles that government employees play and the tasks that they perform, the findings from this study are undoubtedly important. Although public sector managers are prohibited from making hiring decisions based on religiosity, the effects of religiosity still need to be understood in the context of public sector management. For example, knowing this information can allow managers to ensure that the workplace is supportive of those who are religious. Pargament (2002) noted that when religious identity is not supported, religious adherents can suffer emotional distress.

The framework of catalytic engagement may be useful in further examining this topic. That is, public sector managers may wish to look at the needs of their workers in order to determine if and how the workplace is able to meet those needs. As Llorens, Klinger, and Nalbandian (2015) have suggested, focusing on need fulfillment may separate organizations from focusing on creating a “culture of commitment” to a “culture of compliance” (p. 219).

These managers may also wish to borrow ideas and language from the literature on diversity management. Religious public sector employees may have different needs than their nonreligious counterparts. As noted by Groeneveld (2011) in her study on diversity management, policies in public sector workplaces need to reflect the diverse needs and values of different groups of employees. Learning how to meet and fulfill those needs has tangible consequences for the workplace. Indeed, research has shown that the successful implementation of diversity management can lead to an increased sense of well-being (Mor Barak & Levin, 2002).

These findings have several other implications. In particular, studies have long shown a link between job satisfaction and job tenure (Brawley & Pury, 2016; Brown & Peterson, 1993; Dougherty, Bluedorn, & Keon, 1985; March & Simon, 1958; Tschopp, Grote, & Gerber, 2014). Increases in job tenure are generally associated with increases in power. Thus, it may be reasonable to assume that bureaucrats who stay in their jobs longer accrue more power. Future research should explore how religiosity influences this relationship.

Additionally, little is known about which types of bureaucrats are religious. This study grouped all bureaucrats together. It is possible, though, that some areas of government work may be more attractive to religious bureaucrats. Are religious bureaucrats more likely to work in positions that require person-to-person interaction? Or, do they prefer to work alone? Are religious bureaucrats more likely to work in their own communities? Or, do they want to serve the nation? These and other questions still need to be explored.

It should be noted that this study only focused on the United States (US), where the religious composition is changing and fewer people identify with a religion. There has also been growth in smaller faiths such as Islam and Buddhism in the US. Additionally, the separation of church and state is foundational to America. What happens in bureaucracies where the government operates as a theocracy? How might an adherence to a particular faith have an impact on the delivery of services? These are certainly other areas worthy of investigation.

Finally, it should be noted that this study only used two variables to measure religiosity. Other studies have included a battery of questions and/or other variables to capture this multidimensional concept. While both church attendance and frequency of prayer are commonly used measures of religiosity, the use of other measures could help to determine the robustness of the findings from this study.

## **Conclusion**

Scholars have long examined the causes and effects of job satisfaction in the public sector. However, the role of faith had yet to be incorporated into these studies. In this study, I hypothesized that increases in religiosity would be associated with increases in job satisfaction in the public sector. Using surveys spanning a nearly 20-year period, I estimated statistical models to test this hypothesis. The results indicate that religious bureaucrats are, indeed, more satisfied with their jobs than nonreligious bureaucrats.

For scholars, this article provides additional support for the idea that bureaucrats may not be neutral instruments in carrying out their duties and responsibilities. Although Weber (1922; 2013) called for neutral and rational administration, myriad studies have shown that discretion and active representation can shape the implementation of policies (e.g., Denhardt & deLeon, 1995; Lipsky, 1980; Sowa & Selden, 2003). Thus, scholars should continue to explore how faith impacts the delivery of government services.

For practitioners, the findings from this study suggest that religion can play an important role in the work lives of bureaucrats. Thus, it is important for public sector managers to make sure that the workplace remains a tolerant and respectful place for those of all religious affiliations. This may also encourage public servants to increase their knowledge and tolerance of other faiths and better understand their coworkers.

Bureaucracy remains an essential element to good governance. For many, religion remains an essential part of life. This study increases our understanding of both.

## **Notes**

1. Some studies show that job satisfaction has no effect on performance (e.g., Keaveney & Nelson, 1993; Shore & Martin, 1989). Furthermore, the exact causal mechanism for the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance is still disputed (see Judge et al., 2001).
2. This is similar to Pargament's (1997) view that religion is "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (p. 32). This includes objects such as community and work that are sacred due to their relationship to a higher power.
3. One can also argue that religious individuals will have higher job satisfaction because they view their work as a way to serve God. If this is the case, however, the effect of religiosity on job satisfaction should be the same across the private and public sectors. To test this, I estimated an additional model using private sector employees. I then compared this model with the public sector model using seemingly unrelated regression. The joint covariance matrix allows for a test of any restriction involving the coefficients across the models; therefore, a Wald test was used to compare the equality of the religiosity coefficients. The effect of religiosity on job satisfaction was significantly larger in the public sector than in

the private sector. This suggests that the effect of religiosity in the public sector is different from that in the private sector.

4. Tests indicated that these variables should not be combined into one measure (i.e., Cronbach's alpha was less than 0.60). These variables were also not collinear. As such, I modeled them as separate variables.
5. Other measures of attendance, such as a dummy for those who attended at least once a week, were also used. Use of these measures did not alter the substantive findings.
6. Other measures of prayer, including use of a categorical variable, were also used. Use of these measures did not alter the substantive findings.
7. While this variable is coded as the natural log of the frequency of attendance at religious services in the statistical models, it is presented as a dummy variable in the descriptive section for ease of interpretation.
8. Other models, including a fixed-effects model, were also tested. Analysis of every specific year was also conducted. The results were robust across the various specifications.
9. It is possible that job satisfaction is confounded with life satisfaction. While it has been suggested that the relationship between job and life satisfaction may only run from job satisfaction to life satisfaction in the public sector (Mafini & Dlodlo, 2014), other studies have shown that a more reciprocal relationship exists across sectors (e.g., Unanue, Gómez, Cortez, Oyanedel, & Mendiburo-Seguel, 2017). Although there was not a measure of life satisfaction in the data set, there was a measure of happiness. These two measures have been shown to be highly related over time (DeJonge, Veenhoven, Kalmijn, & Arends, 2016). I included this measure as an additional independent variable. The results were statistically and substantively unchanged. As such, I omitted this variable from the analysis.

## **Disclosure Statement**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Job Satisfaction	3.46	0.72	1	4	1397
Public Religiosity	2.36	1.74	-0.69	4.64	1397
Private Religiosity	0.66	0.47	0	1	1397
White	0.73	0.45	0	1	1397
Age	44.86	12.40	19	88	1397
Male	0.39	0.49	0	1	1397
College	0.43	0.50	0	1	1397
Personal Income	10.89	2.40	1	12	1397
Family Income	11.63	1.30	2	12	1397
Work Hours	0.20	0.40	0	1	1397