

All dog owners go to heaven?

by [David Briggs](#) in the [February 12, 2020](#) issue



(Unsplash/Alvan Nee)

Worshippers who frequently attend religious services are the least likely to own a pet, according to a new study analyzing data on religion and pet ownership from the 2018 General Social Survey.

But not all animals are created equal when it comes to uncovering the truth about cats and dogs and religion.

“We find a strong, negative association between worship attendance and cat ownership,” wrote researchers Samuel Perry and Ryan Burge in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

There are several reasons why devout churchgoers may prefer dogs over cats, the researchers note.

Prior studies have indicated people who own dogs tend to be higher on extraversion and agreeableness. Dogs tend to promote more pro-social activities such as going out for walks and to parks. Religious attenders who appreciate the social bonding and community they find in houses of worship may also be more predisposed to own dogs—animals that offer those same qualities.

Cat owners, in contrast, tend to be more socially isolated. They are more likely to score lower than dog owners on extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness and higher on neuroticism, suggesting cat owners may be more introverted and comfortable alone.

While dogs require regular attention and maintenance, pets such as gerbils or birds provide little human interaction. Cats as pets may hit some owners' sweet spot.

“Living with a cat,” Perry and Burge state, “may be the closest experience to living with a human roommate, who comes and goes as it pleases, and thus, may be a closer (albeit partial) substitute for those who would otherwise participate in social functions like church.”

Perry and Burge said the study did not permit definitive conclusions about the relation among cats, dogs, and religion; future research could be helpful in measuring changes over time and have greater controls that may account for personality characteristics such as introversion/extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

But, as religious participation declines, the researchers state, it is possible that cat ownership in particular may rise “as Americans seek partial substitutes for the human interaction they might have otherwise had in church.”

There are already signs that many religious groups are responding to and lifting up the value of pets, both for their role in what they believe as God's creation and in response to science showing their ability to show genuine affection and provide social support that can reduce anxiety and depression and improve self-esteem.

Animal ministries that were once largely limited to Catholic churches offering annual pet blessings around the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi have become a regular

part of congregational life around the country. Churches have everything from liturgical services affirming pets as part of God's creation to pet food pantries and advocacy groups for animal rights.

In 2015, scores of prominent evangelical leaders launched a declaration resolving to confront "any and all cruelty against animals." "Every Living Thing: An Evangelical Statement on Responsible Care for Animals" further declared all animals are deserving of compassion and challenged the faithful to work for their protection and preservation.

There is even growing speculation on the afterlife of animals. One theory says that precisely because dogs are sinless, they will be restored in a new creation.

And there are many who think dogs can teach us lessons about unconditional love.

Humorist Mark Twain puts it another way: "Heaven is by favor; if it were by merit, your dog would go in and you would stay out." —Association of Religion Data Archives