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Does Religion Really Make You Happy?

by Anthony Egan SJ

Recently I came across some interesting surveys. The first was the 2020 World Happiness Survey; the second was the 2018 Pew Research Survey of most and least religious countries. What was disturbing was that religiosity (seen as holding belief in high importance, attending services and praying regularly) did not correlate with happiness.

Worse still, the most religious countries on Earth were among the least happy.

Does this imply that religion makes you unhappy? Not exactly. Look at how the Happiness Survey defines itself: wealth, political stability, an effective welfare system, religious and political freedom etc. In short, it understands happiness as a sense of well-being and contentedness. Second, the Pew Survey looks at strength of religious belief and practice. These are two different categories. What unites them is the inverse correlation of countries surveyed.

Countries that are most religious and least happy are all places of conflict: many have authoritarian governments, many of them failed. They also tend to be places where religion is itself authoritarian, even fundamentalist, often in cahoots with the authorities. They are also often places where religious institutions have replaced the state in providing functions like welfare and healthcare. Some might infer from this that when – if – these societies return to 'normal' religion may become less significant in people's lives.

I am not suggesting this as some kind of 'iron law' of secularisation (which is itself a contested idea) but merely recognise that in most developed countries, the most 'happy' countries, this has seemed to be the case.

So, does religion really make you happy? Perhaps we should ask: is religion a substitute for happiness, an alternative to well-being? Historically, this seems a valid observation. Religious beliefs sustained slaves and peasants in various cultures, ancient and modern; faith strengthened people during wars and crises. Worse still, tyrannies often used religion to maintain social control over people – with the frequent collusion of religious authorities.

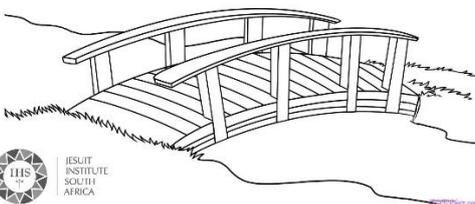
There is much to be said, then, for Marx's observation that 'Religion is the opium of the people', the latter understood in its 19th Century sense as a medicine to reduce pain. But does the Happiness Survey also confirm his view that better social conditions that create a happier society will ultimately cause religion to 'wither away'?

Not necessarily so. I am reminded of another piece of research that studied the relationship between well-being and different forms of Christian and Buddhist meditation. Their conclusion – based on studies of groups of monks and nuns – showed that contemplative prayer improved their subjects' sense of well-being in general, mental health in particular.

What then do I conclude? First, while religion does not make you happy, it may offer a certain level of relief in difficult situations. Second, certain forms of religious practice – meditation – actually improve well-being, even in relatively normal and happy situations. It suggests that religion is more complex than believers or unbelievers would like to imagine. It is how we use religion that makes a difference.

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