

Chapter 12

Happiness and Religion



Abstract Modern happiness research makes it possible to empirically measure the impact of religion on subjective well-being. There is a positive correlation between religion and happiness, with a robust effect of churchgoing and Protestant confession, while the results regarding internal religiosity or faith are more ambiguous.

Models of Religious Activity

Economic models seek to explain religious activity and individual choice of denomination. Individuals are assumed to allocate time and goods between religious and consumer goods in such a way as to maximize the sum of utility from the present life and the afterlife. Through regular religious activities, a “religious asset” is accumulated in the present life. The religious asset will be consumed in the afterlife, with utility resulting from it. Calculating the opportunity cost of acquiring the religious asset can explain some of the existing empirical patterns. Thus, as women and retired people receive lower incomes on average, they are more likely to spend time in church, since their opportunity cost of going to church is smaller than for people with higher income.

There are various payoffs to religious activities that individuals can earn in this life. The benefits gained immediately and derived from religion include, among others, a sense of purpose or meaning, group identity, and social support. There is also a learning process that is related to religion. Individuals accumulate religious capital by regularly exercising religious rites. In other words, they acquire human capital, which enables them to execute religious activities more efficiently and at decreasing costs. Higher human capital leads to higher benefits from religious activity. Religion can be seen as a learning-by-doing process. The more experience one has, the less demanding is the maintenance of faith; these individuals are said to enjoy a decreasing marginal cost of faith. This dynamic helps to explain the greater religiosity of elderly people. Religious human capital increases with age, leading to lower cost of faith and a higher optimal level of faith.

Types of Religiosity

Religion can be divided into internal and external religiosity. Internal religiosity or faith is defined as belief in God and a trusting acceptance of God's will. External religiosity refers to all observable activities that are undertaken in a religious context, most conspicuously when going to church. It is useful to distinguish between these two dimensions, since subjective well-being can be affected by both or either of them, and they might work in different ways. For example, it is not clear whether church attendance increases subjective well-being by proximity to God and the lessons learnt during the service or because one has social contacts with other churchgoers.

Internal Religiosity: Faith

Researchers have established a positive relationship between faith and subjective well-being: believing in God has a positive impact on global happiness, life satisfaction, life excitement, and marital happiness. Religious people also suffer from fewer negative psychological consequences of traumatic life events. It has even been found that no other factor influences life satisfaction more than does religious belief.

Several reasons have been proposed to explain the clear positive connection between faith and subjective well-being. Individuals may derive happiness from a relationship with a supernatural being with whom they interact. In addition, belief in God enables individuals to create a system of meaning and thus greater purpose in life. Through religion, setbacks in life can be understood as part of a greater plan and as a challenge. This explanation is supported by findings in psychology where the handling of personal setbacks with faith, termed religious coping, has a significant impact on well-being.

Internal religiosity or faith creates spillover effects to non-religious people. People are more satisfied with their lives in more religious regions, and this holds both for those who are religious and for those who are not.

The overwhelming evidence of a positive impact of internal religiosity on happiness has to be interpreted cautiously: Most of the studies concentrate on the United States, where more than ninety per cent of the population describe themselves as religious and where religiosity plays a pronounced role even in modern life. Results in less religious countries, such as Denmark or the Netherlands, do not show such clear evidence of an effect of faith on happiness.

External Religiosity: Attending Church Service

Going to church and building social networks within one's religious community plays an important role for religious individuals. Studies have shown that the frequency

of church attendance increases the probability of reporting greater happiness. It also has a significant positive impact on marital happiness. Church attendance has a higher impact on happiness than praying. Analogous to the spillover effect of internal religiosity, church attendance also has positive spillovers on the well-being of others at the aggregate level.

The impact of church services on well-being is related to the community life they engender. Church life is an important factor in religion and its effect on subjective well-being. It is not religious service attendance per se that has an impact on well-being, but the number of friends in one's congregation. Happiness derived from religion is thus only partly caused by proximity to God; friends in the church community are also responsible for the increase in happiness. People can gain greater happiness by having a close network of friends without necessarily being religious.

Denomination

Happiness researchers have also investigated whether reported well-being differs depending on one's denomination. Such a hypothesis is justified given the differing value systems and institutional structures of churches. Protestants have been found to be happier than Catholics. This effect is explained by the organizational structure of these denominations: Protestants derive greater well-being from a higher autonomy in their belief, from their collective identity, and from better social integration. Moreover, Christians in general seem to have an advantage compared to other religions in subjective well-being. The probability of being happier is considerably higher for pious Christians than for Buddhists. However, some studies do not find any impact of denomination on well-being in Europe.

Religiosity can also have an indirect effect on happiness. Most religious rules promote a healthy lifestyle and communicate values and norms that facilitate and strengthen social connections. Religious people also serve more often as volunteers, which is associated with higher subjective well-being.

Effect Size

Going to church is positively correlated with subjective well-being in a statistically significant way. This finding is in line with other findings that attribute the positive correlation to the effects of social networks, social contact, and group identity. Compared to other factors influencing happiness, this correlation is quite strong. Going to church at least once a week substantially increases happiness. The effect on happiness is of a similar magnitude as having a partner instead of being single. It is also sizeable compared to the most important factor in happiness estimations, having a job compared to being unemployed.

Literature

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